



Embroidered cabinet

Not on display

Title/Description: Embroidered cabinet

Born: 1650 - 1675

Object Type: Box, Cabinet, Casket, Textile

Materials: beads, Glass, Metal, metal braid, metal purl, Metallic, chenille and silk threads, mica, Paper, plain weave silk, plush weave silk, ribbon, seed pearls, silk satin, Wood

Technique: Back stitch, Couching, Detached buttonhole stitch, French knot, Needle lace, Overtwisting, Raised work, Rococo stitch, Satin stitch, Tent stitch

Measurements: h. 146 x w. 215 x d. 163 mm

Accession Number: 1250

Historic Period: 17th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

This seventeenth-century cabinet, likely made by a schoolgirl, is one of the smallest examples of an early modern embroidered cabinet or casket known to survive. A box such as this would have held its maker's letters and writing implements, tiny needleworked objects and sewing supplies, fragrances, and precious objects such as jewellery and gems. The box is a cabinet rather than a casket, as it has both a door that opens (or, in this case, falls forward) and a lid that is lifted. It has an unusual format, with a fall-front door opening on one of the shorter sides, instead of double doors opening on the long side, as is the case with most other flat-lidded cabinets. [1] The only other known cabinet with such a composition is an example at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. [2] This example is of a similar size and features highly similar needlework, suggesting the two objects were by girls taught by the same teacher.

Each side of the cabinet includes at least one figure, rendered in a variety of needlework styles. Some of them appear to have been cut out of other pieces of needlework and adhered to the cabinet's surface before being outlined in now-faded pink silk thread. The lid shows two such figures, a courting couple with a man doffing his hat and a woman holding a staff, surrounded by a variety of flowers and insects, in addition to a castle, church, and well. Below their feet sit a lion and stag, often seen on seventeenth-century needlework, who flank a fish-filled grotto. The castle's windows are made of mica and the animals and grotto are adorned with miniscule beads.

In the centre of the cabinet's front is a keyhole in which a key is inserted to lift the lid and drop the front door. The front panel presents a seated female figure, holding a wheat sheaf and a cornucopia, accompanied by a basket teeming with fruit. She is likely meant to represent Plenty. She wears a necklace made of seed pearls and the basket and cornucopia that flank her are lightly raised, creating subtle three dimensionality. Plenty is surrounded by a variety of flowers and part of a house, stitched in the top left corner. On the lid, a dog chases a hare, while an oversized butterfly with wings made of detached buttonhole stitch flies in between the chase.

The panel on the viewer's right side features a shepherd playing a flute for an attentive dog, a goat, and two sheep. He sits under an oak tree with a church and house in the distance. On the lid portion is stitched a hare flanked by flowers, a caterpillar, and a butterfly. The back panel shows a shepherdess, perhaps representing the sense of smell, who sniffs a flower and sits next to a basket of flowers. Many pieces of seventeenth-century embroidery include female personifications of the senses, but the inclusion of just a single scent is rarer. Also stitched onto the panel are trees, fruit, and a bird, snail, and castle. The lid portion displays a bird, several insects, and flowers.

The panel on the viewer's left side shows a hunter, cut from another piece of needlework, blowing a horn while accompanied by two dogs who chase a stag. The hunting scene is decorated with a fruiting tree, various flowers, and a house in the upper right corner. On the lid sit a squirrel, butterfly, and snail, as well as several oversized flowers.

While most cabinets and caskets of the period have an interior of salmon-coloured satin, this cabinet's interior includes plain and plush weave silk in a less common, dark green tone. Below the lid is a central cavity flanked by a pin cushion with a secret compartment inside, spaces for two scent bottles (one of which survives), and a compartment containing two pounce pots which can be lifted to reveal another secret chamber. The borders of these sections are painted gold and their interior walls are covered in purple paper. On the interior side of the lid is a looking glass, a rare survival. Lowering the fall-front door reveals a large tray which was likely used to hold letters or writing paper. This is logical, given that seventeenth-century boxes of this shape made of other materials were used as writing cabinets [3].

Isabella Rosner, January 2022

[1] Melinda Watt, 'Cabinet with Personifications of the Five Senses, 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. 212.

[2] 'Cabinet with personifications of the Five Senses,' Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/222231>.

[3] Melinda Watt, 'Cabinet with Personifications of the Five Senses, 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. 208.

Further Reading

Mary Brooks, *English Embroideries of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2010).

Mary Brooks, Elizabeth Feller, and Jacqueline Holdsworth, *Michéal and Elizabeth Feller – the Needlework Collection 1* (Needleprint, 2011).

Melinda Watt and Andrew Morrall, *English Embroidery in the Metropolitan Museum, 1575-1700: 'Twixt Art and Nature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
