



Embroidered Picture, Feast Scene

Not on display

Title/Description: Embroidered Picture, Feast Scene

Born: 1650 - 1675

Object Type: Embroidering, Textile

Materials: Linen, Metal, Silk

Technique: Detached buttonhole stitch, French knot, Laid and couched work, Rococo stitch, Satin stitch, Straight stitch, Tent stitch

Measurements: Unframed: (h. 270 x w. 373 mm) Framed: (h. 523 x w. 630 mm)

Accession Number: 1279

This embroidered picture, depicting a feast scene, is likely taken from a c.1650 print that has not survived into the twenty-first century. The picture shows a man and woman, dressed in the fashion of the 1650s, being waited upon by two servants. A fifth figure walks out of the frame, his back to us.

This picture was likely made by a nonprofessional needleworker, such as a girl at school or woman in the home, rather than by a career stitcher. Whoever worked the piece likely borrowed the scene from an etching that was widely produced and disseminated. Seventeenth-century England saw an explosion in print culture for the monied masses, which led to prints being a very popular source of inspiration for amateur needlewomen.

All of the figures wear their hair in long curls, and the man sat at the table and the man serving him both wear hats. The man at the table reaches toward a plate on the table, while the servant stood next to him places another plate on the table. The woman extends her hand towards a plate on the table, while observing a round object the servant stood next to her proffers. To the viewer's left of the table, in the far-left corner, is a low table upon which various bottles stand. Behind this is the figure who walks away. Who is he and where is he going? Perhaps he has walked away to gather more food for the feast, or maybe the inclusion of a figure with his back facing the audience has a deeper symbolic meaning. It is difficult to say what the significance would be, as this scene seems solely allegorical rather than biblical, classical, or historical. The focus on food suggests that the scene is a representation of the sense of taste. The scene seems to take place outdoors. Tasselled cords gather billowing fabric to reveal a lush landscape featuring rolling hills with manicured trees and a variety of buildings in the distance.

Though the print source for this embroidered work has not yet been found, it was likely adapted from Abraham Bosse's 1635-8 etching called "Taste," taken from his series "The Five Senses" ("Les Cinq Sens") [1]. Though there are differences in the setting, figures, and time period, both scenes depict feast scenes in which servants attend to a seated couple. It is likely that the print source for the embroidered picture was published in the 1650s, given the figures' clothing.

Intriguingly, the scene's composition is highly similar to an early eighteenth-century Indian painting in the collection of the British Museum, which shows a man and three women in European clothing partaking in a feast in Mughal India [2]. The positions of two figures at the table and the two servants attending to them are identical in the painting and the embroidered picture, implying the use of the same, now lost or not yet identified, print source. The use of the same print in England and India across half a century illustrates not only the power of print culture in the early modern world, but also the ability of these etchings to be adapted across a wide variety of media and cultures.

Isabella Rosner, January 2022

[1] Thank you to Lizzie Marx for this suggestion.

[2] Thank you to Elizabeth Aranda for drawing a connection between the British Museum painting

and this piece of embroidery: 'Painting,' British Museum,
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1928-0815-0-5.

Further Reading

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

Malcolm Jones, *The Print in Early Modern England: An Historical Oversight* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

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