

Accession Number: 1243

Historic Period: 17th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

This large scale embroidered picture depicts the Judgment of Solomon in its centre and female personifications of the senses in its four corners. The picture's stitcher, likely a schoolgirl at the end of her needlework education, utilises detached buttonhole stitches to add three-dimensionality and texture to figures, flora, fauna, and structures. The inclusion of the Stuart coat of arms suggests that the picture's maker - or her teacher or family - was a supporter of the Stuart monarchy. The lack of facial hair on the king who sits below the coat of arms is rare and perhaps even significant, as nearly all men in seventeenth-century needlework pictures are depicted with the period's fashionable goatee. Could the barefaced king represent King James II of England, who used this coat of arms and who was famously clean shaven? If it is indeed James II who is being likened to Solomon in this scene, it would be possible to date this picture to between 1685 and 1688.

Both biblical scenes and allegorical imagery were popular in early modern English needlework, but the two were less often depicted in the same picture, as they were here. The biblical scenes most commonly depicted by English schoolgirls were those that involved pious, virtuous, and caring woman. The second mother in the story of the Judgment of Solomon is one such figure. Depicting the senses as women was well established by the early seventeenth century [1]. Here, Sight gazes at herself in the mirror, Taste eats a piece of fruit, Smell sniffs a flower, and Touch is being lightly bitten by a bird.

In this picture, Solomon (who may also be King James II) sits underneath a canopy embellished with the royal coat of arms and gestures towards a man holding a baby by the foot in one hand and a sword in the other. Next to him are two supposed mothers, one standing with arms outstretched and one on her knees, pleading. Behind them, on the viewer's right side of the picture, stands a sentry. On the other side of the king, on the viewer's left side, is a man holding one arm out toward the king. Next to the king's feet is the deceased baby. In the four corners of the picture are Sight, Taste, Smell, and Touch. In between Sight and Taste, at the top of the picture, is a house with a cockerel perched on its fence and textured roof tiles. The house is flanked by trees with fully three-dimensional fruits, made of wood covered in embroidery. At the bottom of the picture, between Smell and Touch, are a lion, spotted leopard, fountain with a bird atop it, strawberry plant, and various flowers. Throughout the picture are animals (including a squirrel, dog, and several birds), insects, fruit, and flowers.

Isabella Rosner, March 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. 208.

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).
