



Purse in the form of a bunch of grapes

Not on display

Title/Description: Purse in the form of a bunch of grapes

Object Type: Textile

Materials: Gold, Seed Pearl, Silk, Silver

Technique: Couching, Detached buttonhole stitch, Finger Weaving

Measurements: h. 55 x w. 215 mm

Accession Number: 1278

Historic Period: 18th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

The near perfect condition of this miniscule bag, which takes the form of a bunch of grapes, tells us that it was not carried or used on a regular basis. It, like the many other small, embroidered bags that survive from early seventeenth-century England, was perhaps used as a container for a gift or as a sweet bag, a fragrance container. Its minuteness suggests it would not have held coins and the flatness of its internal compartment limits what would have been stored in it. This indicates that it probably was indeed used as a sweet bag, held to the nose like a pomander or used in linen and clothing storage areas. The majority of seventeenth-century sweet bags are square in shape, but some are shaped like animals (such as frogs or crabs) or bellows. This is one of a very small number of purses in the shape of grapes held in public collections.

Grapes are a common motif in early modern English needlework, appearing in everything from samplers and tent stitch pictures to glove gauntlets. The “grapes” on this purse are blue, green, pink (perhaps originally red), purple, and black. Each has a pearl at its centre. Each grape achieves its three dimensionality through heavy padding. Detached buttonhole stitches are worked over the padding and fastened to a ground fabric to create a round shape. At the top of the bunch of grapes is a vine leaf worked in green silk and metallic thread and bordered with gold purl. The two sides of the purse are symmetrical and are attached with a hinge and an interior of salmon-pink silk. The purse hangs from a cord made of silver and pink finger woven threads. On each side, a trio of grapes hangs off the vine leaf via a similarly finger woven cord. There is a further trio of grapes attached to the bottom of the bunch by two chains of metal-wrapped cord.

This purse is nearly identical to an example at the Victoria and Albert Museum. [1] The V&A object also has a polychrome bunch of grapes with pearls, purl-bordered vine leaves, hanging trios of grapes, and silver and pink finger woven cords. The objects differ slightly in their vine leaves and the V&A example lacks the two trios of grapes that hang from the vine leaves. The identity of the

two extant purses, as well as the high quality of material and work, suggests that they may have been made at a professional workshop rather than in the home or at school. There is a small possibility, given the similarity of the two pieces and the extremely fine condition of the Sainsbury Centre's piece, that the Sainsbury example is a later copy of the V&A one. There are known instances of extant seventeenth-century needleworked objects being copied in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is difficult to conclude this, though, as there are extant examples of seventeenth-century needlework in near-perfect condition and multiple copies of nearly identical, professionally wrought pieces that survive from this period.

Isabella Rosner, February 2022

[1] 'Purse,' Victoria and Albert Museum, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O74989/purse-unknown/>.

Further Reading

John Lea Nevinson, *Catalogue of English Domestic Embroidery of the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1938).

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