



Purse

Not on display

Title/Description: Purse

Born: 1600 - 1625

Object Type: Textile

Materials: Linen, Metal, metal purl, Silk, Wood

Technique: Couching, Detached buttonhole stitch, Gobelin stitch, Tent stitch

Measurements: h. 275 x w. 130 x d. 10 mm

Inscription: It is difficult to read the entire text, but what is legible reads, "WOUND NOT THAT HART WHO [or THOU] HOW ART COME TO SALUTE."

Accession Number: 1326

Though this looks like a typical purse, seventeenth-century bags such as this one would not have

been everyday accessories used to carry money or other quotidian goods. Rather, they were more likely used to hold sweet scents. Richly embroidered bags of this sort were stitched in the last decades of the sixteenth century through the early decades of the seventeenth century and the survival of so many examples suggest they were very popular amongst those wealthy enough to afford them. Small decorative bags appear on many household inventories from the period and were listed as “sweet bags.” The pouches were filled with fragrances and placed in linen and clothes closets to keep textiles smelling fresh.

Sweet bags were also worn on the body, suspended from a girdle around the waist. In this form, they were likely used as needleworked pomanders, held to the nose to stave off unpleasant odours or the miasmatic spread of illness. Oddly, sweet bags are absent from the visual records – they do not appear in portraits, prints, or drawings from the period. The large number of surviving sweet bags implies that such objects were treasured and not used often enough to be damaged or fall apart. Small purses were also used as a form of gift wrapping in the seventeenth century, used to hold money or jewellery presented on special occasions. The annual inventories of gifts received by Queen Elizabeth I for New Year include many such bags.

Most sweet bags are embroidered with flowers and plants, often copied from illustrated botanical books widely published in early modern Europe. This bag is no exception. It features a carnation, cornflower, primrose, a pair of lilies of the valley, and two peapods. The flowers and pods are made of detached buttonhole stitch and the pods can be lifted to reveal three-dimensional peas. Tucked among the plants is a blue and gold snail. The flowers are connected by thick chains made of metal purl. While the purse does not have the rinceaux patterns typical of so much early modern embroidery, its adoption of floral motifs and inclusion of metal purl chain is in line with the needlework aesthetic of the time. Both sides of the bag are symmetrical. Like many bags of the period, this example has a silver thread ground. At the bottom of the bag are three silver and salmon-pink tassels which complement the salmon-pink silk interior of the bag and the silver and pink finger woven drawstring.

This sweet bag has a drawstring with woven text, which is relatively unusual. It is difficult to read the entire text, but what is legible reads, “WOUND NOT THAT HART WHO [or THOU] HOW ART COME TO SALUTE.” It may be that two short phrases have been combined. No contemporary source for the full inscription or for “would not that h[e]art” or “how art come to salute” has been found thus far.

Isabella Rosner, February 2022

Further Reading

Jacqui Carey, *Sweet Bags: An Investigation into 16th and 17th century Needlework* (Carey Company, 2010).

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

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

'Sweet Meat Purse with Pastoral Landscape' in the Cora Ginsburg Catalogue, Winter 2005,
<https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/ginsburg/article/view/23967/17693>.
