



Embroidered Casket

Not on display

Title/Description: Embroidered Casket

Object Type: Box

Materials: Metallic, chenille and silk threads

Technique: Couching, Cross stitch, Detached buttonhole stitch, Long and short stitch, Overtwisting, Raised work, Satin stitch, Tent stitch

Measurements: h. 117 x w. 410 x d. 305 mm

Accession Number: 1303

Historic Period: c. 1650

This embroidered casket or box, which dates to approximately 1650, was stitched by a professional embroiderer rather than a schoolgirl or woman in the home. Most 17th-century caskets, which open via a lid, and cabinets, which open via a lid and via two front doors, were made by English schoolgirls toward the end of their needlework education [1]. Caskets and cabinets were especially popular in the third quarter of the 17th century. They usually held a girl's most precious objects, including sewing supplies, letters, writing tools, shells, gems, and treasured trinkets. Exactly who used professionally made boxes of this type and what they put in them is less clear. The box sits upon four metal feet.

This casket, which is skilfully embroidered with threads that have maintained much of their vibrancy, exhibits a combination of Old and New Testament stories, as well as other biblical and natural imagery. The lid shows the Judgment of Solomon. Solomon, whose crown, sceptre, and robe are embellished with couched metal thread, sits on a throne decorated with silk-wrapped metal strips, above which a winged angel head is perched. Flanking Solomon and the accompanying seven figures are flowering trees which grow from a ground stitched using chenille threads. The remaining portions of the silk ground have been decorated with a sun (with a face), a crescent moon (without a face) and stars, clouds, birds, and insects.

The casket's front panel shows Mary and two female attendants spinning a shroud for Jesus, who has been taken off the cross and who lays in the centre of the panel. To the viewer's left of the scene is an elephant and what is possibly a rabbit, and to the right stand a stag and unicorn. While the figures on the lid are dressed in vaguely classical garb, Mary and her attendants wear mid-17th century gowns and sit in a contemporaneous landscape that features a house and church. In the centre of the scene is a keyhole into which a key can be inserted to open the casket's lid. Above this scene, on the narrow edge of the lid, are stitched two angel heads with wings of silk-wrapped metal strips, which flank biblical imagery including Noah's Ark, a snake on a cross, and buildings being pelted by rain, which may represent Matthew 7:25 [2].

The panel on the viewer's right side shows a crowned figure on a throne being carted by four crowned figures. This scene may show the Queen of Sheba journeying with her attendants to Jerusalem to meet King Solomon, bringing with them gold, jewels, and spices, or may show the first moments from the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. The fact that the attendants have dark skin is notable, as few pieces of seventeenth-century English needlework include people of colour. Flanking the figures are a spotted leopard with its tongue out and a horse eating grass. The animals stand amongst trees, birds, and clouds. The section above this panel, on the lid's edge, illustrates flora and fauna, including flowers, trees, and leaves, as well as a snake, squirrel, an eight-legged insect, and several birds.

The back of the casket, which lacks a figural scene, is instead decorated with stylised, geometricized flowers and strawberries made from laid and couched stitches. The back side of the lid matches this. In the middle of this panel is what appears to be an owl, but which is heavily faded and therefore difficult to identify.

The left side panel depicts the story of Cain and Abel. Cain, with his grain sacrifice in the background, is shown about to strike Abel, who stands in front of his sacrifice of sheep. Framing the brothers are trees, birds, and each of their houses. The narrow lid portion above shows flowers, insects, trees, and, in the centre, a pair of birds.

The casket's interior is covered in salmon-coloured silk. On the inside of the lid is a removable, rectangular looking glass. In the body of the box is an octagonal recess with mirrored sides. To the left are a series of plush compartments that would have originally held jewellery, scent bottles, and other small objects. In the centre of the compartments is a door that can be lifted to reveal a space which conceals a secret compartment. The casket's lid is kept open by the original salmon-coloured ribbon, a rare survival.

The box's skilful embroidery suggests professional production, a theory proven by the survival of two nearly identical pieces of embroidery: the first is a casket in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art [3], while a second piece, a single panel, is in the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. [4] The Dallas box has the same shape, dimensions, and interior composition as the Sainsbury example. The Dallas and Sainsbury boxes have nearly identical front, back, and Cain and Abel panels, as well as matching elephants, spotted leopards, and winged angel heads. The Washington, D.C. panel matches the possible Queen of Sheba or Philip and the Ethiopian panel on the Sainsbury's casket. All three pieces have the same Noah's Ark and rained-upon houses, as well as highly similar human and animal figures. Though the pieces utilise different stitch combinations, they were clearly made by embroiderers with a matching stitching style. These three pieces constitute the only seventeenth-century English needlework casket groups known to have been made by professional embroiderers rather than domestic stitchers.

Isabella Rosner, March 2022

[1] M. 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] Matthew 7:25, *King James Bible*.

[3] 'Covered Box or Casket,' Dallas Museum of Art, <https://collections.dma.org/artwork/5274312>.

[4] 'tom cover panel / panel, embroidery,' Textile Museum, Washington D.C. <https://de1.zetcom-group.de/MpWeb-mpWashingtonGeoWashUniv/v?mode=online&objectId=47531>

Further Reading

'A Needlework Casket Panel Depicting Stories from the Bible,' Christies, sold on 2 November 2011,

https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-5490501?ldp_breadcrumb=back&intObjectID=5490501&from=salessummary&lid=1.

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

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