



Coif

Not on display

Title/Description: Coif

Born: 1580 - 1610

Object Type: Cap, Coif, Headwear, Textile

Materials: Linen, Metal threads, Silk

Technique: Back stitch, Chain stitch, Detached buttonhole stitch, French knot, Plaited braid stitch, Stem stitch

Measurements: h. 205 x w. 160 x d. 120 mm

Accession Number: 1344

Historic Period: 1580 - 1610

Production Place: Europe, Great Britain

This coif, with metal and black silk threads stitched upon bleached linen, is decorated with a *rinceau* pattern of curving, leafy stems from which flowers and fruit grow. A coif, a close-fitting cap, was worn in informal domestic settings in Britain by women of all classes from the Middle Ages to the first several decades of the seventeenth century. By the end of the sixteenth century it was fashionable for coifs, which were originally plain, unadorned linen, to be embroidered upon. Whereas plain coifs were worn by themselves or under hoods or bonnets, these decorated examples became popular for well-off women to wear in the home. Some coifs were monochrome, stitched in only black threads, while others were polychrome. Nearly all embroidered coifs of this period feature natural imagery, coiling stems adorned with flower and, less often, fruits, insects, and animals.

This coif includes honeysuckles, roses, carnations, acorns and strawberries. These flowers and fruits blossom from *rinceaux* (scrolls) which grow organically and asymmetrically. These scrolls can be seen on a variety of media, from wood to ceramic, through the sixteenth century. This coif's sinuous stems are stitched entirely in expensive silver threads and are bordered with thin lines of black silk thread, which serve to further exaggerate the contrast between the shining threads and neutral fabric ground. Though much of the metal thread has oxidised and darkened, this coif would have originally glittered dramatically in sunlight or candlelight.

Coifs stitched in primarily metal threads are relatively rare and suggest the coif's maker and wearer was quite wealthy, as silver threads such as those seen on this coif were made of actual silver. Similarly ornate coifs and caps, featuring a superfluity of metal threads, are in the collections of the

Victoria and Albert Museum, Ashmolean Museum, and Burrell Collection. [1]

This coif's impressive craftsmanship is matched by a storied past; it was formerly in the collection of Talbot Hughes, a British painter and important collector of early modern textiles. The coif is described and pictured in G. Saville Seligman and Talbot Hughes' 1926 book *Domestic Needlework: Its Origins and Customs Throughout the Centuries*, a seminal text which influenced needlework scholarship for years to come.

Isabella Rosner, January 2022

[1] Related Objects:

'Cap,' Victoria and Albert Museum, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O357046/cap-unknown/>.

'Embroidered Coif with designs of roses, borage and foxgloves,' Ashmolean Museum, https://collections.ashmolean.org/collection/search/per_page/25/offset/0/sort_by/relevance/object/47983.

'Embroidered panel; cap; coif,' Burrell Collection, <http://collections.glasgowmuseums.com/mwebcgi/mweb?request=record;id=37007;type=101>.

Further Reading

G. Saville Seligman and Talbot Hughes, *Domestic Needlework: Its Origins and Customs Throughout the Centuries* (London and Paris: Country Life, 1926).

Susan North, "'An Instrument of profit, pleasure, and of ornament": Embroidered Tudor and Jacobean Dress Accessories' in Melinda Watt and Andrew Morrall, *English Embroidery in the Metropolitan Museum, 1575-1700: Twixt Art and Nature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
