



Embroidered Mirror Frame

Not on display

Title/Description: Embroidered Mirror Frame

Born: 1650 - 1675

Technique: Long and short stitch

Measurements: h. 617 x w. 517 mm

Accession Number: 1357

Historic Period: 18th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

Embroidering a mirror frame was a common domestic needlework project in England in the second half of the seventeenth century. This was perhaps because, in the 1660s, mirrors became more readily available and affordable to consumers, a result of English mirror makers improving their techniques [1]. Up until this point, mirror glass was a luxury item that needed to be imported [2]. This mirror, with its symmetrically undulating border, commemorates the four seasons.

At the top of the mirror frame is a domestic scene representing Summer. A man stood underneath a blazing sun prunes a leafy tree while, in the foreground, a child sits playfully in a pear tree. Below the child is a woman placing fruit in a basket. It can be assumed that the man who prunes is the father, the woman with basket the mother, and the child in the pear tree their offspring. Also accompanying the scene is a vine heavy with grapes and a basket teeming with a variety of fruit.

Moving clockwise to the viewer's right side of the mirror, one sees the female personification of Autumn. She stands facing the mirror, wearing a stripy dress and a shawl on her arm. She holds a scythe and a wheatsheaf and is flanked by more wheatsheaves. At the bottom of the mirror is Old Man Winter, the male personification of Winter. He wears a large robe and stretches his hands and feet out towards a roaring fire. In front of the fire is an axe, pile of logs, and pair of bellows. A spotted cat sits opposite the man, also taking in the warmth of the fire.

On the viewer's left side is the female personification of Spring, also in a striped dress and shawl. She stands amongst large flowers. She raises her left hand in a wave, perhaps a greeting toward springtime and the new life it brings with it. In the top corners of the mirror sit two imposingly grand castles and in the bottom two corners stand two fantastical creatures. In the bottom left corner is a griffin with salmon pink and blue wings and in the bottom right a cockatrice with a wing, tail, and wattle in the same colour scheme.

In between the castles and female figures is a dog chasing a hare and in between each female figure and mystical creature is a bird perched on a fruiting tree. There are flowers and insects dotted throughout the composition. The entire surface of the mirror frame is covered in satin stitch, leaving none of the ground fabric visible.

A nearly identical mirror was sold by Sotheby's in 2019 [3]. It features the same design and a very

similar shape, but involves different stitches and colours. Whereas the Sainsbury's Centre example is made up almost entirely of long satin stitches wrought in large blocks of colour, the Sotheby's example includes much shorter stitches and more realistic shading. The resemblance between the Sainsbury's and Sotheby's examples suggests that this design was sold like a kit, with the underdrawing available for purchase from a professional draftsman. Once the underdrawing was stitched upon, a professional craftsman (likely associated with the draftsman) nailed the needlework to the mirror frame's wooden base and added metal braid to the edges. The Sotheby's example has narrow metal braid along the border of the interior and exterior frame edges, while the Sainsbury's example has a broader braid adhered to the sides of the mirror frame. These differences, as well as the slight variations in mirror frame shape, indicate that the two mirrors were fabricated by two different craftspeople.

Variations in stitch, colour, and interpretation of the underdrawing suggest that two unrelated girls or women bought the same pattern and worked it in their own homes. These mirrors were likely not the work of two girls taught by the same teacher or at the same school. Small variations in the design, such as the position of Autumn's shawl and Spring's lack of flower in the Sainsbury's example, likely speak to a difference in skill and pattern interpretation between the two needleworkers rather than deviations in the underdrawing itself. The mirror's pristine condition and slightly unusual thread colours suggest it may be possible that the mirror is a late nineteenth- or twentieth-century copy of the seventeenth-century Sotheby's mirror rather than a contemporary example.

The existence of two such similar mirrors makes very clear the collaboration between professional craftspeople and amateur needleworkers in early modern England. There was often a kit-like nature not only to mirror frames, but also embroidered pictures and boxes, as well as beadwork baskets. Thorough research on economic and social interactions between seventeenth-century stitchers, draftsmen, and fabricators has not yet been undertaken.

Isabella Rosner, March 2022

[1] Melinda Watt, 'Mirror with Jael and Barak,' 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. 216.

[2] Ibid.

[3] 'A Charles II Needlework Looking Glass, Second Half 17th Century,' lot 860, The Collection Of Anne H. & Frederick Vogel III, 19 January 2019, Sotheby's, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/collection-anne-h-frederick-vogel-iii-n10003/lot.860.html?locale=en>.

Further Reading

Amie Bolissian, 'Image-ining Gender: Old Man Winter: Ageing Masculinity in Early Modern

European Culture,' University of Reading,

<http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/gender-history-cluster/2020/07/15/image-ining-gender-old-man-winter/>.

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).
