



OPUS ANGLICANUM, AN ENGLISH ART

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Opus Anglicanum, otherwise known as “English Work,” was the crowning glory of England in the 13th and 14th centuries. It was demanded all over Europe by princes, kings and church leaders including the Pope. It was among the most beautiful and expressive artwork styles ever to come out of England.



This highly valued style of needlework was at its height from 1250-1350 AD and was used primarily for ecclesiastical vestments. There are two major qualities to note about this particular style of needlework. One is the technical skill and the extremely fine quality of materials used to make these pieces. These pieces were expensive to produce. However, they were so highly valued that the financiers of London considered them a great investment. The second quality to note is the beauty and expressiveness in the layout, design and execution of the work. The details of the design make it possible to see the emotions of the characters, which was exclusive to this style of embroidery in its time.

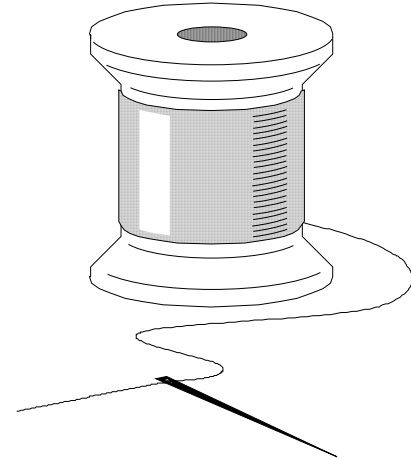
Another item of interest is that this art was one of the few occupations considered honorable for a woman. In fact, the women who produced these works were often given great gifts and praises for their service. For the most part individuals only produced the smaller items such as embroidered bands, miters, cushions and purses. Noble ladies were often noted for their embroidered gifts, and royal households were noted for employing embroideresses. Perhaps one of the most famous of these was Mable of Bury St. Edmonds. Her name is mentioned many times in the household records of Henry III and historians often cite her. She crafted items such as a chasuble, an offertory veil and many apparel items for the King such as a stole, collars and cuffs.

Items were also available for purchase through merchants. The merchants would commission certain types of embroidered items that were frequently purchased as gifts to churches and royalty. On a grander scale, there were several workshops that could be commissioned to do larger embroideries. This became quite profitable by the end of the 13th century when the Pope himself began demanding grand vestments of this style. These grand embroideries often included gold and silk thread, pearls and gemstones set in gold, enamels and silver plaques. These elaborate pieces often took several people years to complete. One example is the altar frontal made for the Westminster Abbey in 1271, which took four women almost four years to complete.





The technique of Opus Anglicanum was fairly simple, though time consuming. It consists of two basic techniques. The first is underside couching or pulled couching, which was referred to as “couche rentre,” that was often done in gold or silver thread. This new style allowed for a greater flexibility in design than previous methods and was often used for backgrounds. The second technique was a basic split stitch. This style was used for the primary designs. It was so finely done that it allowed for a never-before-seen accuracy in detail and shading that gave the effect of painting. Many of the surviving pieces were so finely done that they give the impression of stained glass. The embroideries were most often done on linen ground, although other materials were used, including silk twill and, later, plain velvets. The threads used were gold, silver and colored silks. The materials used were the finest available, because only the finest work would do as a gift to God.



As time will tell all good things must come to an end, and so does the story of Opus Anglicanum. The biggest factor in its demise was the coming of the Black Death in 1348, which wiped out the massive workshops that had flourished. There were several other contributing factors as well. One was that there was a huge strain on resources and availability of materials due to the Hundred Years War. There was also a desire for quicker methods and cheaper materials, so many more items could be produced. The final straw was the growing influence of fine Italian velvets and brocades, which needed much less decoration to be fabulous. Despite its loss of popularity, Opus Anglicanum will remain one of the greatest achievements and most beautiful arts of England.

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