In the special exhibition of English domestic needlework which opens in the Museum on November 6, it is safe to say that the needlework pictures will have the widest appeal. Some seventy of these pictures, probably the largest collection ever brought together, will be there to charm the visitor with their varied subjects and astonishing technical adeptness. Such an assemblage of this delightful phase of English needlework has largely been made possible through the generosity of Judge Irwin Untermyer, to whom a great many of the pictures belong.

The finest needlework pictures were produced in the seventeenth century, and the majority in the exhibition date from that period. During the preceding century the pictorial efforts of the Elizabethan needleworker were confined to such objects as bed valances, cushion and table covers, and wall hangings. Of all these the visitor will see distinguished examples in the exhibition. But the needlework picture as a thing to be framed and hung upon the wall does not appear to have become popular until the reign of Charles I (1625-1649). The most interesting of those that have come down to us, including the four illustrated here, were made between 1625 and 1675. Needlework pictures continued to be produced under the later Stuarts and the Georges, but though occasionally full of charm these are not to be compared with the earlier work.

Biblical stories, nearly always from the Old Testament, provided the subjects most commonly used. Classical mythology, on the other hand, with its wealth of possibilities, appears to have been drawn upon only meagerly. Allegorical themes, such as the Senses, the Elements, the Virtues, and the Months of the Year, were favorites, as were kings and queens (usually impossible to identify) and cavaliers and ladies. How the various compositions were arrived at is still a moot question, but it is probable that various books of engraved designs which are known to have been in circulation in England at that time were an important source of ideas. Among other things, the frequency with which the same details occur with only slight modifications seems to bear this out.

There are two general types of needlework picture. One, which gives the effect of a miniature tapestry, is worked on canvas, principally in tent stitch, or, as it is better known today, petit point. The other is worked in a great variety of complex stitches on a satin ground with areas of the material visible. The so-called stumpwork picture, in which some of the elements were worked in relief over padding, usually has a satin ground, although Mrs. Hesslein’s fine example (p. 53) is on canvas.

Each of the four pictures chosen to illustrate this article is in its own way superlative. Mrs. Ford’s represents the popular Old Testament story of David and Bathsheba. The scene is
A Musical Party. English, second quarter of the xvi century. Worked in silk on canvas entirely in tent stitch. (13 by 20½ inches.)

Lent by Judge Irwin Untermyer
The Five Senses and the Four Elements. English, second quarter of the xvii century. Worked in silk on canvas in tent and rococo stitches. (16 by 21½ inches.) Lent by Judge Untermyer
Jephthah and His Daughter. English, middle of the xvii century. Worked in silk and wool on canvas in tent and Gobelin stitches with some parts in stumpwork. (16½ by 20¾ inches.) Lent by Mrs. Edgar J. Hesslein
shown as the Bible describes it: “And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bath-sheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?”

The beautiful Bath-sheba is shown seated on the edge of a pool surrounded by her handmaidsens. At the right an elaborate baroque fountain supports the winged Pegasus with water spilling from his feet—for according to tradition it was he who brought forth the fountain of the Muses by stamping on the ground. Beyond a great arched arbor rises the king's palace in Stuart guise, and, on the balcony at the upper left, stands David. The picture is worked in wool and silk on canvas entirely in tent stitch, and the colors still retain much of their original freshness.

In Mrs. Hesslein's picture the subject is the tragic story of Jephthah and his daughter. Jephthah, it will be recalled, made a vow that if the Lord delivered the children of Ammon into his hands he would sacrifice, as a burnt offering, whatever came forth from his house to meet him on his return from the war. And accordingly “Jephthah came to Mizpeh unto his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances: and she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter.”

In the foreground of the picture Jephthah is shown wringing his hands in grief as his daughter, not suspecting her fate, comes gaily forward to greet him. Behind him a youthful page leading his horse looks engagingly out of the picture, quite uninterested in the adjacent tragedy. The composition is a tour de force of beautifully executed stitchery. The four figures and the horse in the foreground and the large oak tree at the top center are all in stumpwork in a variety of intricate stitches and needlepoint fillings. The rest of the picture, except for a few minor details, is worked with incredible skill in tent and Gobelin stitches.

Of the two pictures belonging to Judge Untermyer, the Musical Party is the more extraordinary, in that its subject is a rare one if not, indeed, unique. Standing and seated on little grassy hummocks in the foreground is a group of fashionably dressed cavaliers and their ladies. The gentlemen pose dramatically as the ladies play upon their musical instruments. The impression of their being actors and actresses upon a stage is heightened by the inviting garden vista behind them, which, with its tipped-up perspective and naive disregard of proportion, is for all the world like a scenic curtain. The picture is worked entirely in silk in the finest of tent stitches. It appears never to have been finished, for the faces and hands have not been carried beyond the pencil state. The charm of the composition is enhanced by the beauty of delicate coloring.

If the other picture is less remarkable, it is only because its subjects, the Five Senses and the Four Elements, are found more frequently. Hearing and Taste occupy the central positions. Hearing, portrayed as a lady playing a lute, stands beneath a trellis overgrown with gigantic flowers. Taste, an elegant cavalier with rakish plumed hat, stands in front of a tent holding a wineglass in his hand, a table laden with good things to eat beside him. Sight is shown at the left, Smell at the right, and Touch directly beneath. As for the Elements, Fire, in the person of Apollo, occupies the upper left corner, Air, as Diana, the upper right. In the lower corners are Water, as a River God, and Earth, symbolized by Ceres. The figures are all in tent stitch, but the rolling countryside is in the beautiful, open rococo stitch. It would be difficult to find greater skill in the realm of English needlework.