“Three slender things that best support the world: the slender stream of milk from the cow’s dug into the pail; the slender blade of green corn upon the ground; the slender thread over the hand of a skilled woman.”

—The Triads of Ireland (ix century)

Milk, flour, and textiles, the Irish poet says, are necessities. The works of art concocted from the first pair are too impermanent to be found in museums, but the “slender thread,” as well as supporting the world, has served to decorate it in a truly extraordinary variety of ways. Of some two hundred European pieces added to the Textile Study Room during the last three years, the handful reproduced here, though chosen solely for their aesthetic and photogenic qualities, nevertheless illustrate the chief methods by which threads are manipulated to form works of art. They come from a small group of Western countries, Italy, Spain, France, England, and Belgium; they range in date only from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and, except for the lace, they are made with three tools only (not counting the dye vat)—the loom, the needle, and the printing block. It would be hard, though, to name any other primary material—clay, wood, stone, metal—which has been transformed into such a diversity of patterns during this period in these lands.

Most of these textiles are loom-made. By the time the first piece illustrated was woven this basic invention, the loom, more widespread than the wheel, was highly developed; later improvements have served only to increase the speed and ease of working, not the quality of the product. The piece is a velvet, the last of the basic weaves to be invented (cloth, twill, and satin are the others) and the most difficult; in this example, however, the designer, with a kind of bravura, has allowed the rich pile to appear only as the dark outlines of his pattern. The velvet warps lie under gold wefts throughout the piece and rise to the surface only when needed to indicate the thistles, roses, pine cones, and pomegranates that are standard parts of the decorative vocabulary of textile design at this date. Cloth-of-gold is thus the ground, velvet pile merely the pattern, and luxury is heaped on luxury by extra gold wefts which rise in little loops across the width of the fabric to gleam against the velvet.

The second piece, about a hundred years later (p. 125, bottom), shows another way of using the velvet weave. It is all silk and, what is hard to believe from the black-and-white photograph, all the threads are the same color, a deep purple. But the background is satin and gleams in the light; a middle tone is given by masses of uncut loops of velvet, like those on some shaggy towels, but very small, tight, and neat; the blacks are the same loops cut across and made into tufts. A fabric of this type, which is known as “ciséle” velvet, changes with every change of light and every movement of the wearer or the observer; it was very popular in the century between 1550 and 1650, a period when liveliness was admired in all the arts. The Museum has owned a small piece of this velvet for fifteen years, so it is particularly agreeable now to be able to see the whole pattern. It turns out to be a wonder of ingenious succinctness in which full advantage has been taken of the technical necessities of the loom. The subject is the Instruments of the Passion, an extremely heterogeneous collection of disparate objects, many of which are here shown twice in order to make the balanced, mirror-image design that is easy to set up on the loom. There are two groups of the spear, lance, and reed, tied with the cord; two scourges, striking hands, ladders, hammers, pincers, dice, and lanterns—even two cocks to
Velvet with gold ground; the elements of the design are outlined in dark green cut pile and are filled in with gold bouclé threads. Italian, XV century. Rogers Fund, 1951
ABOVE: Large woven border made for the Strozzi family of Florence, the design in brown, yellow, green, and blue on a cream-colored ground. Italian, second half of the xvi century. Rogers Fund, 1951.

BELOW: Purple ciselé velvet with a small-scale over-all decorative design that includes the Instruments of the Passion. Possibly Spanish, Rogers Fund, 1951.
crow for Saint Peter, which seems the least logical of the duplications. Veronica’s napkin is combined with the *titulus* at the head of the Cross, which itself carries the four-letter inscription, elegantly compressed and repeated in reverse. The squat column with the iron ring at the top is an indication of the date of the velvet, for it was only at the end of the sixteenth century that the tall pillar (which Saint Jerome saw, still stained with blood, supporting a portico in Jerusalem) was replaced, in representations of the Scourging of Christ, by the actual relic, only three or four feet high, given to Santa Prassede in Rome by Cardinal Colonna in 1223.

Very different from this miniature elegance is the bold, High Renaissance design of the Strozzi border. This strong and heavy stuff, its silken cover reinforced by a linen core, was designed to be seen from a distance and was perhaps made to be hung on a wall below the cornice. The familiar Strozzi crescents appear here, not lined up in a row as they are seen on the famous fifteenth-century Strozzi chair from the Figdor collection, now in the Metropolitan Museum, but *in cuore*, to use the Italian heraldic phrase, as on the much copied spiky lantern at the angle of the Strozzi palace in Florence. The Strozzi family used eagles on the reverse of several of their medals, and the motto on this textile, *Sic et virtus expecto*, “I await—and so does virtue,” can be connected with the period early in the sixteenth century when the Strozzi were banished by the Medici. The piece is certainly later than this, dating from a time when the family (and, presumably, virtue) had returned to Florence, but a Strozzi of this generation, Alessandro, used the motto *Expepto* on his medal of 1593; the idea had evidently become family tradition, perhaps with another meaning. The King of England still calls himself “Defender of the Faith,” though not in the sense intended by the Pope who conferred the title on Henry VIII.

The needle is an even more ancient tool than the loom, almost an extension of a finger, pointed, attenuated, and pierced to hold the thread. It has also far greater freedom, especially when used for embroidery, as is dramatically shown in the illustration on page 127. This is a detail from a great cope, embroi-
Detail of embroidered cope, the ground couched silver thread in spirals, the flowers and foliage chiefly split stitch in bright colors. Probably French, mid XVII century. Rogers Fund, 1950
Detail of a linen coverlet embroidered in brightly colored silks and silver thread, chiefly in long-and-short stitch, split, stem, and various filling stitches with couched details. Background with diaper pattern imitating quilting. English, about 1700. Rogers Fund, 1950
less style but more imagination or, rather, a wilder fancy; what is the lion doing guarding the raised portcullis, what regimental morning report holds the name of the little soldier with his tasseled busby? Costumes made of fabrics so fantastically ornamented must have provided many a polite gathering with conversational openings.

We return to the work of the needle with a piece of lace. Most of the design consists of threads woven and plaited by bobbins and the ground is a machine net, but the little details that give life and sparkle to the fabric were made with a simple needle. The metamorphosis of the prosaic linen or cotton thread into lace is as astonishing as the change from kaolin to porcelain, or dough to flaky pastry, and requires nothing as drastic as a hot oven. The sample shown comes at the end of the short history of lace as an art form, and the Victorian spirit has run riot, breaking down the earlier restraints of design and stylization in an emotional welter of naturalism. A good deal of the charm of this piece is that of the flowers themselves, so emphatically presented to us, and aesthetic appreciation is almost overwhelmed by astonishment at the manual dexterity, such as we feel when confronted with a set of Chinese ivory spheres, each incredibly inside the next larger.

The simplest way to ornament a piece of cloth would seem to be to print a picture on it. We are so accustomed to seeing everything from the Eiffel tower to a starfish printed on our cotton frocks that it is hard to remember that, as in so many other fields of human endeavor, simplicity is a late-comer in textile fabrication. The process was known from very early times, and the scarcity of specimens is due, in part, at least, to the fact that it was used for cheap fabrics which have not been preserved. Only in the eighteenth century did the printing block, or the engraved copper roller, begin to be, in Europe, a serious rival to the drawloom and the embroidery needle. Fast dyes, previously very few in number, were discovered, and a whole new field was opened to textile designers. All the mechanical limitations imposed by other tools fell away, and there was no reason why a strip of cloth should not look like a roll of wallpaper or an engraving. The toile de Jouy illustrated tells a story; unfortunately, it has not been interpreted. The plot must turn on the two sources of water, the practical pump under the palm-fringed kiosk (which seems uncertain whether it is Chinese or Gothic until it triumphantly proclaims itself Turkish by the crescent on its tip) and the gushing stream that springs from the picturesque ruined arch below. The figures have a theatrical air, and it is possible that they are acting out some play or opera that was a hit about 1770. We have come a long way from the noble beauty of cloth-of-gold and velvet, but from beginning to end we have been following the “slender thread.”
LEFT: Detail of brocade with blue ground and many-colored design. Rogers Fund, 1950. RIGHT: Detail of brocade with tan ground, soldier in blue. Rogers Fund, 1951. Both were made in Italy in the xviii century.
Detail of a skirt, bobbin lace applied on machine-made net. Belgian (Brussels), late XIX century. Gift of Mrs. William Guggenheim, in memory of her son, William Guggenheim, Jr., 1950
Panel of printed cotton, red on white ground, copper-plate print. French (Jouy), 1750-1775. Gift of Mrs. Lydia Bond Powel, 1950