THE LEGEND OF SAINT CATHERINE TOLD IN EMBROIDERY

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In the Middle Ages people liked their embroidered textiles not only beautiful with shining gold and silken threads but also meaningful with scenes from well-loved stories of saints and heroes. And so the tale of Tristan and Isolde, for instance, would be stitched on a bedspread and the life of Christ on a liturgical cope. In those days pictorial embroidery was, in every sense of the phrase, a fine art.

In fifteenth-century Italy painters of renown like Sassetta drew cartoons for embroideries, Squarcione was himself an embroiderer, and Pollaiuolo made the designs for the embroideries of John the Baptist in Florence. In the north, although less is known, a relationship also existed between celebrated painters and embroiderers. The famous vestments of the Golden Fleece, now in Vienna, were inspired by the designs of Robert Campin and Jacques Daret. The embroideries of the Seven Sacraments in Berne were probably copied from the Seven Sacraments altarpiece in Madrid, painted by a follower of Rogier van der Weyden. Many a Flemish guild of Saint Luke included embroiderers along with sculptors and painters. In the Middle Ages those who made pictures with a needle and thread were often as highly skilled and as highly valued as those who made pictures with brush and pigment. Their work was called “needle painting” (peinture à l’aiguille).

The Cloisters is the proud possessor of four little needle paintings, measuring about six and a half inches in diameter, which rank with the best among existing fifteenth-century embroideries. When they were acquired in 1947, with funds provided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., nothing was known about them except that they had been purchased by the late Joseph Brummer from a dealer in Italy. Some experts called them Italian, some Spanish, some French, others Flemish. No one had identified the subject matter, and certain people felt that they were not even medieval in workmanship.

Although the four embroideries are about the same size and shape, they can be divided into two pairs that are different from each other in drawing, color range, technique, and iconography. The present article is a discussion of one pair and of other embroideries in the same series belonging to Robert Lehman, Irwin Untermyer, and the Seattle Museum, all of which illustrate the legend of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, virgin martyr and bride of Christ.

Since the artist who drew the Catherine scenes included no haloes or other saintly attributes in his designs, it seemed at first that these embroideries might not represent the story of a saint at all. In one of the Cloisters roundels (p. 282) a rather arrogant young princess with reddish hair, dressed in an ermine-trimmed surcoat, gazes at something in a gilded frame held by an
Saint Catherine, with her mother and a lady-in-waiting, looking at the picture of Christ and the Virgin shown her by the hermit and, at the left, her baptism. One of a series of fifteenth-century embroideries. At The Cloisters

old man. The contents of the frame, originally worked in the finest of silk, has worn away. Behind the princess stands an anxious queen, whose carmine robe is delicately held up by a round-eyed, piquant lady-in-waiting, elegantly coiffed and gowned and ready for a mild flirtation. At the left the young princess, bereft of her crown and her ermine, kneels in sweet and maidenly humility while the same old man pours something on her head from a silver ewer. The setting is out of doors; flowers bloom in the foreground, on either side two trees grow on narrow hills, and at the left stands an open-doored hut with a little bell. This could be a scene from a medieval romance. It seemed possible, though, that the object which the bewhiskered old man is showing to the princess was originally a picture of the Virgin holding the Christ Child. In this case the princess would be the young Saint Catherine, the queen her mother, and the old man the hermit Adrian, who gave Catherine a picture of Christ and later baptized her as a
Scenes from an altarpiece, showing Saint Catherine and the picture of Christ, her vision of the Virgin, her baptism, and her marriage. By a follower of the Saint Cecilia Master. Formerly in the Hearst collection.

Christian. The lady-in-waiting, though decorative, is not essential to the story.

The fourteenth-century Italian altarpiece illustrated above shows these same scenes as part of the legend of Saint Catherine. Fourteenth-century sculptures of the life of Saint Catherine, formerly in the church of Santa Chiara in Naples, also included the scene of the hermit presenting Catherine with an “image” of Christ. The Saint Catherine frescoes by Spinello Aretino in Antella, near Florence, and a Flemish painting by an unknown follower of Rogier van der Weyden show the young Catherine adoring the picture of the Virgin and Child. There seems to be no doubt that our embroidery represents the prelude to the more familiar episode of the mystic marriage of Catherine to Christ.

The literary source for this story is found in
LEFT: Catherine listening to the crowds on their way to the temple to worship idols. Embroidery in the collection of Robert Lehman, New York. The architectural details in this roundel and the one on page 286 seem related to the fresco illustrated above of Catherine in the temple by Spinello Aretino, 1387 (in Antella, near Florence).
French poems of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and in Latin prose versions, one of which dates as early as 1337. Strangely enough, the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints* by Jacobus da Voragine, ordinarily a fruitful source for medieval saints' lore, does not mention the incident.

All versions of the legend differ slightly, but the main account runs about as follows. In the days of Diocletian there lived in Alexandria a young princess named Catherine, daughter of King Costis and Queen Sabinella. From infancy she studied the “seven liberal arts, which no cleric could know better.” Her father, proud of her learning, caused the best scholars of his realm to be her teachers. She became so skilled in all the wisdom of the pagans that no one could surpass her, and those who came to teach her remained to learn. “She was also blessed with a beauty so marvelous that it seemed almost impossible to believe that there could be such beauty in all the world.”

When Catherine was fourteen years old her father died and she succeeded him as ruler of the country. Her mother and the barons of the realm besought her to marry so that she might have a husband to share with her the responsibilities of the throne. But Catherine was unwilling, saying that the one she would marry must be possessed of more wisdom and more beauty than she, and he must surpass her in nobility of heritage and in power. And when the queen, her mother, heard this she was very sad, for she feared that such a man could never be found. “My daughter,” said she, “is this thy great wisdom that is talked of afar!”

The queen, who had become a Christian, though Catherine remained a pagan, took her daughter to a holy hermit named Adrian for advice. Whereupon the hermit presented the young Catherine with a picture of Christ, and Catherine, looking upon that “fair face,” loved him and declared that this one she would have for a husband and no other. That night in a dream Catherine met the beautiful Virgin with her son, but the son turned away from her, saying: “She has not yet been baptized.” And she awoke, weeping. So she was baptized by the hermit, who instructed her in the faith, and never did she cease adoring the picture of him whom she loved. “Now when Catherine was praying fervently in her chamber one day, Jesus Christ, King of Glory, came to her in fine array with a great company of saints and angels and placed a ring on her finger in token of her marriage to him,” promising to “comfort and strengthen” her always.

The next incident in the story, Catherine preaching against the worship of idols and confounding the scholars summoned by the emperor to defend the pagan faith, is illustrated in two of Mr. Lehman’s and one of Judge Untermyer’s embroideries. Most accounts of the legend of Saint Catherine, from the Greek Menologium in the tenth century down to Voragine’s *Golden Legend* in the thirteenth, begin with this incident.

One day the young Catherine as she dwelt in “her palace full of riches and servants” heard the sound of trumpets, the shouting of people, and the braying of beasts. The messenger whom she sent to inquire the cause of the clamor returned with the news that the emperor Maxentius had ordered “all the people to adore false gods and to bring sacrifices on pain of cruel torments or even death.” Then Catherine, sorely troubled, went to the emperor, saying, “Wherefore hast thou . . . assembled this multitude of people thus in vain for to adore the folly of the idols?” And in the pagan temple, “by many a syllogism and many an argument” she disputed with the emperor until he was “much abashed,” for he could not answer her logic. And when he saw that in no manner could he match her in wisdom, he sent for all the great grammarians and rhetoricians and philosophers of his realm, offering them great gifts if they could confound this young woman. Fifty scholars famous for their eloquence came and debated at length with Catherine, but it was she who confounded them, so that they “wist not what to say and were all still.” In fact, not only were they silenced but all fifty of them were so convinced by Catherine’s reasoning that they too became Christians and were forthwith martyred by fire at the order of the angry emperor.

The three embroideries that illustrate Catherine’s defense of Christianity, though worn in places and in other places restored by a hand
Catherine in the temple arguing against the worship of idols, embroidery in the collection of Robert Lehman

less skilled than that of the original fifteenth-century needle painter, are easily read and dramatic illustrations of a part of Catherine’s story that even in the fifteenth century was very old and well loved. Only one detail appeared somewhat puzzling at first, namely, the large golden pig in the foreground of the temple scene. The designer may have intended it to represent one of the beasts brought for sacrifice to the pagan gods, which the embroiderer worked in gold thread by mistake in the same technique as he worked the image of the god himself. Or it may have been intended as a caricature of a false god fallen from his pedestal. Painters sometimes showed the idols toppling as Catherine talked.

Catherine does not appear at all in the second of the two roundels in the Cloisters collection (p. 290). Here is a queen with her ladies-in-waiting apparently clasping the hand of a courtier who wears a dagger in his belt and is attended by his squire. The queen is not the
queen who was Catherine’s mother, for she wears a different headdress and a different crown. The scene can best be interpreted as an incident in the conversion by Catherine of the emperor's wife.

The emperor, enraged at Catherine for winning his wise men over to the Christian faith, commanded that she be beaten and put into a dark dungeon and “tormented by hunger” for twelve days. Now the empress, having heard of the prowess of Catherine, longed to see her and speak to her; so she “called a prince of her chivalry named Porphyry to her and made known her wishes.” He told her that he had witnessed the dispute and the conversion of the fifty scholars and their death by burning, and was amazed that nothing of their clothing or even the hair of their heads was consumed. So Porphyry conducted the empress secretly by night to Catherine in prison. And the empress, entering, “saw the prison shining by great clearness and angels anointing the wounds of the holy Catherine.” She talked with Catherine until midnight and at that time was converted to Christianity. Then Porphyry too fell down at Catherine’s feet and, with his two hundred knights, received the faith.

Our embroidery probably shows the empress and Porphyry on their way to visit Catherine. The embroidery in the Seattle Museum seems to represent the meeting of Catherine and the empress. Were it not that the empress wears her own distinctive crown one would be tempted to interpret this scene as the earlier incident in the life of Saint Catherine when she describes to her mother the sort of man that she would wed.

The two remaining roundels in the Catherine series (p. 291) have both undergone considerable restoration, and both present problems in interpretation. One could well be a further illustration for the episode of the idols. In the manuscript of the Life of Saint Catherine made for Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, the author describes how Catherine went twice to the temple, and the illuminators of the same manuscript show the argument of Catherine with the emperor in three separate scenes. All the versions indicate that Catherine argued at great length—quite long enough to cover two embroideries.

There is another explanation to be found, however, in the event that took place following the conversion of the empress and Porphyry.

After Catherine had been in prison for twelve days the emperor commanded that she be brought before him. He thought to find her emaciated by the starvation that he had ordered, but instead he found her “shining” and in good health. When Catherine explained that she had been fed not by prison guards but by angels from heaven the emperor said that he was shocked to see a young woman “of noble ancestry fall under the spell of diabolical illusions and false apparitions.” Catherine countered by urging Maxentius to cease worshiping his idols and accept Christianity. “This made the tyrant like a raging lion gnashing his teeth.” In the embroidery, the emperor’s idol is an important part of the setting.

A great deal happened in the story of Saint Catherine between this scene and the scene of the last embroidery. The “raging” tyrant ordered that Catherine be bound between two revolving wheels with knives, but an angel from heaven broke the wheels with such force that a large number of pagans perished. This cruel treatment of Catherine so outraged the empress that she confessed to her husband that she was a Christian; when she refused to give up her belief she was taken outside the city, tortured, and
Catherine confounding the emperor's fifty scholars, embroidery in the collection of Irwin Untermyer, New York

beheaded. Then Porphyry also acknowledged his Christianity to the emperor. At this Maxentius "began to roar and bray as a mad man" and commanded the knights of Porphyry to come to him for questioning. The last embroidery may represent this incident, or possibly the arrival of the knights, who, to a man, all said: "We also be Christians and be ready to suffer death for Jesus Christ."

It is obvious that these eight little needle paintings form only a small part of the original ensemble. Enough of the legend has been told to suggest how many of the important scenes are missing, and there remains much that has not been told, such as the emperor's offer to make Catherine his wife, Catherine's final martyrdom by the sword, the removal of her body to Mount Sinai, and the reception of her soul in heaven, where she joined forever her beloved Christ. How many of these embroideries there were we shall probably never know, and undoubtedly we shall never be sure how they were arranged or what kind of vestment or chapel furnishing they enriched. Perhaps they formed part of a grande broderie like that presented to the cathedral of Angers in 1462 by René of Anjou, which consisted of cope, chasuble, tunic, dalmatic, and altar frontal, all embroidered with scenes of the life of Saint Maurice, patron of the cathedral. They could well have served as borders of an
altar frontal or dorsal, framing larger scenes of key episodes in the life of Saint Catherine, such as her mystic marriage or the attempted torture of her by revolving wheels. A “table d’autel” of similar design is described in the inventory of Philip the Good of Burgundy in 1420. Here “in the middle [is] the history of the nativity of Our Lord and many figures around, all made in embroidery...and many other histories all around of the great feasts of Our Lord and of the Passion...” The embroidered altar frontal of the Golden Fleece is an existing example of such a composition except that instead of scenes there are single figures of prophets and apostles.

Although we can at best only guess at the original arrangement of our embroideries we can be sure that, with their rich backgrounds of gilded threads and their figures finely stitched in silk of many hues, they must have formed an ensemble as magnificent as the vestments of the Golden Fleece—and perhaps more interesting, because of the greater variety of the compositions and the vivacity of the storytelling.

The Museum’s roundel of Catherine and the hermit best shows the true quality of these embroideries, for it is the only one that remains almost unrestored. The stitchery on the face of the Catherine kneeling for the baptism has worn away, exposing the original drawing on the linen cloth. When compared with the face of the other figure of the saint in the same embroidery, it can readily be seen how the work of the needle painter, though very skilled indeed, imparts a slight heaviness to the features. It would be difficult to imagine, though, in embroidery, anything more spirited and expressive than the countenance of the lady-in-waiting to the queen. Other expressive un-restored heads are those of the two trumpeters in Mr. Lehman’s roundel of the idol scene and the man with the turban in the scene of the emperor and the knights in the embroidery belonging to Judge Untermyer. The drapery especially is rendered with an appreciation for the beauty of heavy silk in folds and sometimes for the beauty of the body beneath. The few hands that remain un-restored, such as the solicitous hand of the queen mother in the hermit scene, the hands of the lady-in-waiting in the same scene, and those of the trumpeters

![Miniature from the manuscript of Saint Catherine showing the episode of Catherine and the scholars](image)
in the idol scene, must have been drawn with great skill to have emerged with such fineness even when stitched in silk. Except for certain details, such as tresses of hair or ornaments, the stitches for the figures are vertical while the gold threads of the background are couched down in horizontal lines. Thus the embroidery suggests the warp and woof of fabric and as a result achieves the textile quality of such woven pictures as tapestries. One would like to associate these embroideries with the great tapestry centers of the time, Tournai and Arras, which were important centers for embroideries also. But not enough is known of the workshops of embroiderers to draw any conclusion from the technique.

The style of the drawing does, however, seem to point to this region. There are many details reminiscent of the early work of Rogier van der Weyden, pupil of Robert Campin, master painter of Tournai. The head and figure of Catherine in the hermit scene resemble many of his young women, and Porphyry’s head seems close to that of the Saint John in Berlin (p. 293). Much of the drapery could have been composed by Rogier, especially the cloak tucked under the arm, worn by Catherine’s mother, and the stiff silk folds of the gown of the lady-in-waiting in the
The empress and Porphyry going to visit Catherine in prison and Catherine before the empress. Embroideries at The Cloisters and in the Seattle Museum.
Catherine brought by her jailers before the emperor and the emperor with messengers or Porphyry's knights. Embroideries in the collection of Irwin Untermyer
scene of Porphyry and the empress. The hand of the queen mother as she touches her daughter has the same gesture of tenderness as the hand of Saint John in the Vienna Crucifixion.

The designer of our embroideries might conceivably have been another pupil of Robert Campin, Jacques Daret, fellow student of Rogier’s in Tournai. Daret’s paintings for the altarpiece of the abbey of Saint Vaast in Arras (1434) show the same delight in narration, the same smiling interpretation of solemn religious scenes, the same animation in faces, gestures, and attitudes as our roundels. The features of the queen mother and the hermit in the embroidery are not unlike Daret’s older women and men, and some of the drapery also recalls his work. According to the records Daret designed tapestries for the abbey of Saint Vaast and his daughter was a professional embroiderer. It would be rash to conclude, however, that either Jacques Daret or Rogier van der Weyden drew the designs for our embroideries. One can merely suggest that either of these two pupils of Robert Campin might have done so, and if they did, they would not have been ashamed of the job.

The closest connection that we have been able to establish with any known document is with the Vie de Madame Sainte Katherine of Philip the Good mentioned above, which was translated from the Latin by Jean Mielot for the duke in 1457. Of the sixty illustrations for this manuscript, two, hitherto unpublished, bear obvious similarities to our embroideries. The trumpeter in the idol scene is almost identical with the trumpeter on the right in the embroidery, even to the position of the hands on the horn. The same is true of the idol on the altar and the architecture. The differences lie mainly in the choice of characters and in their grouping.

The embroidery (discounting the restorations) appears to be the superior piece of work. The drawing of the two trumpeters (unrestored) has more life, the composition is more varied, and certain details such as the columns supporting the archway are more functional. The Catherine of the embroidery (face and hands restored) is very close to the Catherine in another miniature, one of those illustrating her dispute with the scholars. In comparing the drapery of her costume in the embroidery and the manuscript, it is again apparent that the embroidery is superior, especially in the rendering of silken folds falling in a variety of patterns on the ground. The distinctive ermine top of the surcoat, cut in an unusual pattern of inverted scallops, which Catherine wears in all the embroideries, is imitated in a weak and uncertain manner by the artist of the miniatures, who was obviously more familiar with the typical royal surcoat having only the wide armholes bordered with ermine.

One must conclude that the artist who illustrated these pages in the book was copying from the embroideries or that both were using a common source such as a painted altarpiece, in which case the painter of the embroidery designs came closer to the original or perhaps even did the original himself.

The identity of the painters of the miniatures is not known, neither the illustrator of the pages that have been discussed nor the other, sometimes associated with Guillaume Vrelant, who worked in an entirely different, more independent style quite unrelated to the roundels except in subject matter (see p. 281). Even in subject there is a divergence, since the book omits the distinctive episode of Catherine receiving the portrait of Christ from the hermit. Although there is not enough evidence to connect the Catherine embroideries directly with the court of the Duke of Burgundy, it is certain that the illuminator of some of the pages in the duke’s manuscript crossed paths somewhere with the designer of the embroideries.

Philip the Good of Burgundy had a special liking for Saint Catherine, as is shown not only by the elaborate and unique translation of the saint’s life with its sixty illustrations but also by other Saint Catherine treasures in his possession. The inventories and account books tell of a “golden reliquary” with an image on it of Saint Catherine “enameled in the round”; a “round picture in gold” of Saint John and Saint Catherine; an altar cloth embroidered with the
Coronation of Our Lady with Saint Nicholas and Saint Catherine on either side. It might be added that the duke’s mistress, to whom he paid forty pounds in 1433 “to help her to live and more honorably to maintain her estate,” was named Catherine. The Duchess of Burgundy was so devoted to Saint Catherine that she made a pilgrimage to her shrine in Fierbois and later ordered a pilgrim’s “sign” of Saint Catherine made in gold.

There are many references to rich embroideries in Philip’s account books. Our Catherine roundels might well have adorned one of the chapel vestments furnished by Thierry du Chastel, valet de chambre and embroiderer to the duke, during 1432 and 1433. Or they could have been part of the “cope for a prelate, of gold embroidery scattered over with many pictures of saints and angels,” mentioned in the inventory made about 1467 at Philip’s death, or even one of the “six orphreys, some large and some small, very richly embroidered with many personages” listed in the same inventory.

The costumes worn by the men and women of our roundels are those made fashionable by the luxury-loving Burgundian court. The ladies of high rank wore V-necked gowns, cloaks with trains carried by attendants, and elaborate headdresses which dipped low over the foreheads and rose high on the sides above padded and jeweled hair. Shoulders were narrow, waists tiny, and abdomens prominent. The long trains were considered sinful by the clergy and the headdresses were likened to “horned beasts” and Satan. Catherine, being a saint, is costumed in the more conservative “cotte” and surcoat of an earlier era, with only a crown on her head.

The men wore pointed shoes, short tunics, and overgarments, long or short according to the dignity of the person or of the occasion, with full sleeves, padded shoulders, and collars high in back. The heavy material was often fashioned to hang in stiff, vertical folds. The headdresses varied from brimmed fur hats to draped hoods with scarflike ends drawn under the chin. These are the costumes worn by the courtiers of our embroideries. Similar styles may be seen in Flemish portraits dating from 1432 to about 1450.

It is always dangerous to date a work of art from the evidence of the costumes alone; but in the case of our embroideries the styles agree so closely in point of time with the drawing styles of Daret and Rogier in the thirties and forties of the century that we may reasonably conclude that our roundels were made about then.

The more recent history of the embroideries is tied up with that of the two other roundels (see cover) in the Cloisters collection, mentioned briefly in the beginning of this article. These belong to the important series of embroidered roundels in the Textile Museum in Lyons, France. When Louis de Farcy in 1919 published the Lyons group in his Broderie du XI siècle jusqu’à nos jours, he wrote that these embroideries had originally been part of an altar frontal “mutilated” in the seventeenth century and converted into chasubles and orphreys. He added that “M. Duponchel, antiquarian, possesses two almost the same that underwent a similar transformation, probably in a convent in Arras.” It is known that when Mr. Brummer first acquired our roundels they were sewn, together with fourteen others, on two vestments similar to those in Lyons. These two vestments must be those mentioned by Farcy as belonging to M. Duponchel in 1919. Of the fourteen other roundels formerly in the Brummer collection, six have been included in this article as part of the Saint Catherine series. The others, which illustrate the legend of Saint Martin, will be published in a later issue of the Bulletin.