THE BULRUSHES IN THE WAVES

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The person who studies a work of art (as distinct from the perhaps wiser man who is content to enjoy it) must pose to himself a set of questions not unlike those that, we are told, the young journalist repeats sotto voce as he goes to report his first automobile accident. What is it? How was it made? Where? When? By whom? For whom? And, finally, the most difficult and interesting question that can be asked about anything: Why? What we have in the two garments recently acquired by the Metropolitan Museum and illustrated on the following pages is easily answered; they are liturgical vestments, a dalmatic and a chasuble. The date is also no problem, as it is inscribed on both: 1570. All the other questions require more complicated answers.

To begin with, the method of their manufacture is most unusual; the pattern of the red and yellow ground is a late version of the familiar “pomegranate” of the Italian crimson and gold velvets, so often seen on the rich draperies that hang behind the Virgin in Flemish paintings, but these vestments are not silk but wool, and they are woven in the tapestry technique. Vestments made of wool, or ornamented with it, are not uncommon (the decisions of the Congregation of Rites that prescribe silk date only from the nineteenth century), but tapestry-woven examples are exceedingly rare. The Metropolitan Museum has one half of a chasuble and there is a complete example in Uppsala Cathedral in Sweden; no other such vestments are recorded.

Those illustrated here, moreover, are unique in that embroidery, in satin stitch and couched yellow cords, has been used to accentuate details, especially in the figures and the coats of arms. The embroidery must have been planned from the beginning; no other instances of this practice in a tapestry workshop are known.

Tapestry-weaving, in the sixteenth century, was as much a specialty of the Low Countries as velvet-weaving was of Italy. The Museum’s half chasuble, which is of very fine technique and enriched with gold, has been attributed to a Brussels workshop, and the chasuble in Sweden, tentatively, to one in Antwerp. But the recently acquired pieces are harder to place. The coats of arms, which, strictly speaking, can only be called upon to answer the question “for whom?” nevertheless provide an indication; the dexter, or masculine, coat, “gyronny of eight, azure and or,” on the left, is not uncommon, but this example has been identified by the Conservator of the Genealogical Bureau at The Hague as that of the Van der Geer family of Utrecht; the more complicated sinister, or feminine, coat is that of the bastards of the lords of Culenborch, a village ten miles southeast of Utrecht. The strange objects, very carefully outlined in cord, in the first and fourth quarters, are millrinds, that is, irons that support the upper millstone of a corn mill; a wavy, or “engrailed,” border is often used to denote bastardy. The presence of these Utrecht arms, the distinctive, un-Flemish color-
ON THESE PAGES: Front and back of a dalmatic, tapestry-woven principally in crimson and yellow wool in imitation of Italian silk and gold “pomegranate” velvet. The panels, chiefly blue, white, and green, have bulrushes and scrolls with “Flectimur non frangimur undis.” On the front is Saint Veronica’s veil. Rogers Fund, 1954

ing, and the unparalleled combination of tapestry and embroidery led the great tapestry expert Heinrich Göbel to the conclusion that these vestments were made in what is now usually called Holland, probably at Gouda, twenty miles southwest of the city of Utrecht. It is known that tapestries were made here in the first half of the sixteenth century, though none have survived with city, or makers’, marks. When Gouda fell to the Prince of Orange in 1572, its extensive convents and monasteries were ruthlessly cleared of their inhabitants and used to house refugee tapestry-weavers from the southern Netherlands, but though these may have taken over their predecessor’s looms, they certainly wove no vestments.

This sudden reminder of the most hideous aspects of the sixteenth century—persecutions, forced migrations, refugees, all unhappily again commonplace in our own time—brings us to the final question of “why?”, which, in dealing with works of art, means “why like this and not other-
The dalmatic is dated 1570 and was probably made in Gouda for a Van der Geer of Utrecht, as the paternal coat of arms (left) on the back belongs to that family. The bulrushes and the Latin motto on the scrolls must have been the personal device of the Van der Geer who ordered the dalmatic, perhaps for use in his private chapel.

The representation of Veronica's veil, with the head of Christ, on the dalmatic, is not unusual, but the oval medallion on the chasuble has subtler meanings. It represents the children of Israel outside their tents in the desert, gathering their omers of manna; "when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground . . . and it was like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey." The man in the center is Moses, his horns standing up in his tousled hair. The half-reclining man on the
Back of a chasuble, tapestry-woven in wool, and a detail of the front with the center panel. The motto and arms show that it was made for the same person as the dalmatic on the preceding pages. In the medallion are the children of Israel gathering manna; above, in a blue ground, are pieces of falling manna. Rogers Fund, 1954

left holds a long green rod—Aaron’s rod, which “budded and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds”; he presents the manna to a child held by a young woman. Beneath the group is “the golden pot that had manna.” It is not hard to see here a foreshadowing of a more solemn offering to a greater Child and his Mother. Above the medallion are the white circles of falling manna, a reminder that this garment would be worn only by a priest while saying Mass, handling other, more holy, wafers.

But even more conspicuous than these Christian symbols are the panels of bulrushes, black and green against a blue and white sky, rising above turbulent waves and tangled by the wind.
The plants speak in the Latin motto, five times repeated, “Flectimur non frangimur undis,” “We are bent, not broken, by the waves.” This combination of phrase and illustration is an impresa, or personal device, a form of self-expression exceedingly popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This particular one (recorded as early as the fourteenth century), appears frequently in the handy collections of these ingenuities that were among the best sellers of the time. We do not know who the Van der Geer was who decided that the bending bulrushes expressed his state of mind most accurately, but it may well be imagined that the symbol was appropriate. For in 1570 the waves were indeed breaking over the unhappy Netherlands. In 1567 the Duke of Alva had become regent and set up his ghastly “Council of Blood,” which sent so many Protestants to exile or death; in 1569 the “Geux de Mer,” the “sea beggars,” had begun their raids and their murders of priests, monks, and Catholic officials. The province of Utrecht, though a large proportion of its inhabitants was Catholic, took the Protestant side, signing the Union of Utrecht in 1579. In 1580 the last archbishop of the city died, and the Prince of Orange suppressed all Roman Catholic public worship. The man who placed these bulrushes on his priests’ vestments must indeed have needed all their pliancy.

*For a detailed technical description of these vestments see Heinrich Göbel in Pantheon, xix (1937), pp. 122-125; for the half chasuble see John Goldsmith Phillips in the Metropolitan Museum Bulletin, xxxi (1936), p. 163; for tapestry-making in Holland see G. T. van Ysselsteyn, Geschiedenis der tapijtweverijen in de noordelijke Nederlanden, 1936.*

![Detail of the chasuble. Moses is in the center, and Aaron, on the left, is offering manna to a child held by a woman. In front of their tents the Israelites are gathering manna and carrying it in baskets. The scene is in vivid colors and is heavily embroidered.](image-url)