

Embroidered Turcoman fragment

Late 15th century

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Materials: 36 count dyed linen, Silk floss

Stitches: Laid couched work, Outline/stem stitch

Background:

The roundel or rosette is a re-working of an extant piece that from the Newberry Collection at the Ashmolean museum (No. 1993.101) and is featured in “Embroideries and Samplers from Islamic Egypt “ by Marianne Ellis. (1)



The author suggests that the fragment is from the Turcoman empire as opposed to the Mamluk and Egyptian. This would also possibly place it within the Persian empire which was partially controlled at that time at that time by the Turks. Besides a number of both Mamluk and Persian embroideries worked in similar styles (1) there are some more modern examples of Turcoman embroideries from the Caucasus region which also are worked in the couched laid work such as in the example below (5)



18th century Caucasus Laid/Couched Work



Detail of above embroidery

The extant piece is linen, which was the predominant fiber used in Egypt (3) , has dimensions of 10.5cm square with a thread count of 21/23 which translates to approx 53x58 count linen in modern terms. The embroidery is described as being:

“linen embroidered with red, blue, yellow, white, green and dark brown silk in couching, slit and stem stitch.” Also noted is that the design is a *“stylized lotus flower showing a Chinese influence characteristic of the 15th century”* (1)

Many of the pieces from the collection were bits that were cut off the original items, preserving the embroidery only. There is very little proof as to how they were actually used. Where they cut down from other garments? Were these the original pieces with just the embroidery preserved? In this particular instance, the roundel could possibly have been a sample for either a household piece or for use on a piece of clothing. The Turcoman embroidered many household items such as cloths for coffee, bags and saddle cloths. In the Turcoman culture the woman’s garments were very heavily embroidered but the men’s were not as elaborate. Embroidery was used as

an amulet, protecting one from evil spirits. It was generally believed that an evil spirit, on encountering amulet symbols, would be deterred. (6)

The use of the roundel or rosette shape is well documented in Islamic culture, showing up normally as either six sided or eight sided, in star shapes or using the more arabesque pattern as in this fragment. If you look at the architecture and the other textiles such as carpets, the influence on embroidery is seen. The lotus flower design was considered a symbol of purity and immortality in the Buddhist culture, while the arabesque itself tended to be used in those cultures who prohibited the usage of images of humans and animals. (7) The Far Eastern cultures had major influence in the embroidery of Persia during the 14th century under the rule of Timur, a Mongol who conquered both Persia and Caucasus regions of the Turcoman empires (9)

The colors represented within the extant roundel are also typical of the Islamic culture. The colors they chose in their textiles, carpets, household items through to architecture reflected basic symbolism which was part of their basic beliefs. They had four basic colors which were associated with nature: red, blue, yellow and green. One source, writing on Persian architecture discusses one variation of the meanings of the colors in Islamic culture:

“green is hope, fertility and eternity with its two inherent dimensions of past (blue) and future (yellow), and its opposite, the present, seen as red” (2)

The Turcoman color scheme is consistent with this as it was usually limited to the use of 4 or 5 colors and this in conjunction with fabric acting as a background, as in this particular example, it still allowed for very beautiful embroideries. (6)

The brightness of the silks for the floss was some of the most sophisticated of the time. They produced colors very complex and vibrant. The pinks and reds were produced by Lac gum, Indigo made the blues and greens. Yellows and oranges were made from the Safflower as was pomegranate skins and lemon juice made light yellows. The skins of walnuts produced black, while madder, bole Japan wood and Brazil wood made browns. (8)

Design and Execution:

The first step to re-working the extant piece was finding both the linen and the silk floss. The decision was made to use over-dyed linen in order to give it more of an aged effect. While the piece works out to over 50 count, I could not find linen with this fine of a thread count readily available so the decision was to use a lower count fabric.

I changed the colors slightly from the original piece replacing the white with a yellowy gold, which was closer to the color in the aged remnant. I did not use the white because it was not going on white linen as it did not look good when matched up with the fabric. I also chose to make the colors a bit brighter than in the extant piece, in some of an attempt to reflect possible brighter colors of the original dyes, while still keeping in with an attempt to recreate the original.

The silk is Splendor Brand silk floss, a twisted floss, and while not as fine as what would have been used for the original piece it is a nice working silk, readily available and within budget for purchasing the number of colors used in the rondel. The pattern was laid out by copying one quarter of the roundel, allowing for the distortion on the extant piece and then it was traced out to the full circle. Three strands of floss were used in order to get the coverage of the ground fabric without making it too bulky.

The pattern of both the satin stitches and the laid strands varied from section to section even within the same design fragment on the extant piece, so I was not as concerned that I had perfect linear lines and that they were perfectly even. I focused instead on ensuring that my own work had similar lines to the extant piece within while also keeping in mind the lines of the design itself.

The laid work was done by running satin stitches across the design area, then couching down strands at an angle to the satin stitches to anchor the underlying threads. This was done through time as a way to cover large areas of embroidery with maximum conservation of thread (4)

Conclusion:

What drew me to this particular piece of embroidery were the bright colors and the design shape. It had overall simplicity coupled with the intricacies of the arabesque or rosette shape. If I was to do the piece over again, I would find a finer ground for the embroidery. Some of the difficulty doing the embroidery was that it was difficult to line up the satin stitches close together. The larger ground weave sometimes made it much more as well as it also did not allow as much flexibility in laying down the couching where I wanted it to go. In addition I would use less twisted silk floss and a laying tool, to make a much smoother line to the embroidery. As it stands it looks much more aged which is fine for the purposes of a recreated work, but I would like the challenge of doing it with finer materials and making it look perhaps more like the original embroidery may have looked.

Bibliography for the Embroidered Turcoman Roundel

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