

An Elizabethan Purse

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Item Description:

A purse typical of one that would be worn by a gentleman in the late 16th century.



Historical Examples:

The shape, stitches, materials and motif used in this purse are all very typical for purses from the 16th century, of which many examples of each exist. Please see the following pages for pictures of these specific examples.

Construction:

Purse Shape based on: Ship Tapestry Purse and Linen Embroidery Purse

Stitches based on: Ship Embroidery, Queen Elizabeth's Seal Bag, and Linen Embroidery Purse and "Stitches" page on the Historic Needlework Resource webpage

Materials:

Velvet as ground fabric: Queen Elizabeth's Seal Bag.

Silk as embroidery medium: Queen Elizabeth's Seal Bag, Linen Embroidery Purse

Design Motif:

Ship motif based on: Ship Tapestry Purse and Ship Embroidery. While the ships are often stylized, this one is based on the a Spanish Armada ship the *San Mateo*.

Construction Details of this Purse:

Materials:

Ground fabric:	Cotton velvet
Lining fabric:	Linen
Construction stitches:	Silk thread
Embroidery:	Silk floss
Drawstring:	Silk satin ribbon

Construction Techniques:

Embroidery:	Split Stitch, Stem Stitch, and Chain Stitch
Seams:	Running stitch
Support:	Wooden scroll frame

Making the Purse:

I first embroidered the ship onto the velvet ground, using silk embroidery floss, a modern steel needle, and a wooden scroll frame. Then I cut out eight identical three-sided pieces – one from the velvet with the ship embroidery centered on the piece, three from the plain velvet, and four of the linen lining. I sewed the four lining pieces together and the four purse pieces together with running stitches to form two purse shapes. I added embroidery along the seams of the exterior and then sewed the lining and the exterior together around the top. A blind running stitch was added just around the top to keep the lining inside the purse and another line of blind running stitch about ½ inch from the edge formed a drawstring casing. I poked two holes on either side along the top and used buttonhole stitches to create four eyelets to serve as create drawstring holes. Silk ribbons were strung through the drawstring casing and were simply knotted to complete the purse.

Substitutions and Extrapolations:

Ground Fabric: Silk velvet is difficult to find and prohibitively expensive when it is available (\$70 per yard!) and so cotton velvet was substituted. While it lacks the sheen of silk velvet, it is much nicer to work on than the very slippery synthetic velvet that was the alternative. I do not have any documentation showing a similarly patterned Renaissance velvet used for a purse, but this particular velvet, with its “wave” pattern was particularly appealing for this maritime project.

Lining fabric: The lining fabric was rarely if ever identified. A velvet lining would be impractical due to the bulk, so another known ground fabric, linen, was used for lining.

Construction: A modern steel embroidery needle was used. A running stitch was used for the construction stitches, but the construction of the period examples was unknown.

Discussion

I am pretty happy with the way this purse turned out. When the drawstring is pulled tight, the purse can be obscured by the puckering of the fabric, so if I had to do it over, I might place it lower on the bag than I did here. Its placement is in line with the ship on the tapestry ship purse, however. Embroidery on velvet can be challenging, so I am glad I chose a low-pile velvet for this project. Even with the large amount of time invested in embroidery, the finished product is somewhat plain when compared to the historical exemplars, so I will plan on additional motifs on future purses to better full the available space.

Bibliography

Burse. (n.d.). *Search the Collections*. Retrieved June 20, 2014, from <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O10808/burse-unknown/>

Phillips-Birt, D. (1971). *A History of Seamanship*. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc..

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Ship Tapestry Purse



Tapestry woven French purse (17th Century CE) with four shield shaped panels. Held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England (552-1901)

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O75038/purse-unknown/>

Linen Embroidery Purse



English linen purse with silk embroidery (c 1540CE) with two shield shaped panels. Held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England (T.246-1927).

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O74959/purse-unknown/>

Queen Elizabeth's Seal Bag



Purse for Queen Elizabeth's seal (1558-1603) velvet worked with metallic and silk threads, linen appliqué, and spangles. Held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England (T.40-1986).

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O10808/burse-unknown/>

Ship embroidery



Ship embroidery dated 1607

No information available about content or stitches, but appears to be stem and split stitches from the photograph.

Phillips-Birt, Douglas. *A History of Seamanship*. Doubleday and Company, Inc., New York, 1971. Photo from page 106.

Embroidered Ship Purse

