BOOK REVIEW: Rosamund Garrett and Matthew Reeves. Late Medieval and Renaissance Textiles (London: Sam Fogg, 2018)

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In *Late Medieval and Renaissance Textiles*, Rosamund Garrett and Matthew Reeves present thirty-six lavish textile objects, the vast majority of which have never been exhibited or published before—only two of the pieces have been exhibited previously (cat. nos. 13 and 20), while only three have been published already (cat. nos. 13, 18 and 20). The catalog accompanied an exhibition with the same title at Sam Fogg in London from June 14 until July 13, 2018. There is so much exciting, new material presented in this volume that scholars of a variety of media have an opportunity to mine for more extensive research endeavors.

The authors have done in-depth technical analysis of each textile—providing detailed condition reports and describing the intricate and, at times, multiple and incredibly complex weaving approaches. The thirty-six objects are organized by region (England; France and the Netherlands; Germany; Spain; and Italy) and then listed chronologically by date (earliest to latest). The four examples from England are all textiles known as *opus anglicanum* (English Work)—the name given to high quality English embroidery made at the turn of the fifteenth century. Most of the catalog entries commence with a description of the work, then continue on to explain the technical aspects, and conclude with related works and comparative visual materials, many of which are different media, thereby making the textiles of these two-dimensional catalog entries expressly come to life. This is especially true for the vast majority of these pieces that originally decorated liturgical vestments—such as chasubles, dalmatics, and copes—that were intended to be worn in highly ritualized church ceremonies. In addition, supplementary images of other media provide a larger visual context.
for how many of these textile panels and fragments would possibly have been used. For instance, the entries draw upon wonderful examples such as stained glass (cat. no. 1); painted roof panels (cat. nos. 1, 20); illuminated manuscripts (cat. no. 2, 5, 29, 36); panel paintings, many of which are part of altarpieces (cat. nos. 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 24, 26, 27, 30); woodcuts (cat. nos. 18, 22); ceramic tile (cat. no. 19); mosaic (cat. no. 25); frescoes (cat. nos. 27, 28, 29, 34); an oil painting (cat. no. 35), as well as tapestries (cat. nos. 7, 34) and other comparative textiles (cat. nos. 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 22, 23, 26, 32, 35, 36). Of course, these representations of textile usage cannot be taken as unmediated recordings of their usage, but they certainly help paint a broader picture of the important role that textiles played in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

What also makes this affordable catalog so impressive is the truly luscious photographic reproductions of the textiles—each entry has an overview photograph followed by details that provide an opportunity to observe the incredible textures (one could even describe them as a type of landscape as seen in the macro photos) of the warps, wefts, stitches and threads. Most importantly, these details shed light onto how they were made, furthering our understanding of textile production practices of the periods. Take the finely embroidered liturgical vestment panels (cat. no. 14) that are shaped into a lowercase “t” cross illustrating the crucifixion, along with the figures of the Virgin Mary, Saint John and Saint Peter at the bottom (Fig. 1). A reproduction of a detail of The Throne of Mercy accompanied by saints and a donor by the Master of the Lyversberg Passion, (active around 1460–90), gives us a sense of how this vestment would have looked while worn by a prelate (Fig. 2). In turn, the catalog text reveals that both weavers and embroiderers would have been involved in the creation process. We learn that the woven lampas silk serves as the backdrop and surface support for embroidered elements—including the cross and its inscription, the garments of the Virgin and Saints John and Peter, and the grassy knoll of Golgotha—but the piece also includes applied embroidered components that were made separately on linen patterns (cut to shape the exact space into which they were stitched), as seen in the figure of Christ and the faces of the Virgin and Saints John and Peter. This manufacture approach offered several advantages. First, it allowed for a streamlining in the production process, since the weavers could work on the lampas background support at that same time that the embroiderers wove individual linen pieces from stock patterns. Second, embroidering on thin linen—as opposed to the thicker lampas silk support—gave the embroiderers ultimate control over and precise delineation of details such as eye sockets and lips. Because the head of Saint Peter is missing, we are afforded the chance to peer into this entire process since the lampas support has surviving ink outlines (in essence an under-drawing) where the small, embroidered linen head was to
Fig. 1 (Cat. no. 14) – Liturgical vestment panels showing the Crucifixion, accompanied by the Virgin and Saint John, with Saint Peter below, Germany, Rhineland, probably Cologne, c. 1480, embroidered lampas, Sam Fogg, London. Photo: Matt Pia with David Brunetti.
be placed (Fig. 3). A similar understanding is achieved with two comparative images presented in an entry devoted to fifteen embroidered orphrey panels (cat. no. 8). The two comparable pieces come from the Catharijneconvent in Utrecht from the late fifteenth century and show the embroidered linen patterns of Saints Catherine and John removed from their backgrounds to which they were originally stitched—these figures are illustrated as being popped out of their place within the completed weaving (Fig. 4). Just like a cartoon would be transferred on the wall for a fresco, the cartoons for these embroidered linen
Fig. 3 (Cat. no. 14) Detail of Saint Peter from Liturgical vestment panels showing the Crucifixion, accompanied by the Virgin and Saint John, with Saint Peter below, Germany, Rhineland, probably Cologne, c. 1480, embroidered lampas, Sam Fogg, London. Photo: Matt Pia with David Brunetti.
Fig. 4 (Cat. no. 8, Figs. 8.4–8.5) The Figures of Saints Catherine and Saint John the Evangelist, shown alongside their backgrounds, Northern Netherlands, late 15th century, gold and silk embroidery, Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, inv. ABM t 2165. Photo: Matt Pia with David Brunetti.

figures were first pricked along their outlines and then pounced on the ground fabric; in turn, ink or graphite would have reinforced these under-drawings on the linen support. These figures also could be mechanically copied, furthering our understanding of the process even more. Like a manuscript commission, the patron of these textiles could personalize them: “Individually applied motifs such as these offered considerable flexibility in design and budget: not only could applied motifs be tailored to a patron’s particular interest, but pieces could be bought as components in accordance with a desired expenditure and either assembled and applied to the vestment in the original workshop or by a local vestment maker” (49). Although these types of figures could be made in multiples, this did not necessarily lead to a subsequent decrease in their quality.
In fact, the examples described in this entry (cat. no. 8) show an impressive level of high-quality stitching, combined with the use of opulent metal threads, indicating an especially expensive commission. Other textiles discussed in the catalog in which the under-drawing on the linen ground can be seen, include: an opus anglicanum panel with Saint James (cat. no. 3) and abraded areas of the faces and garments in the figures that make up two separate orphrey sets (cat. nos. 11 and 34).

Although each individual object considered in the catalog is a fascinating case study, there are some pieces that are truly sensational—either due to the textile’s rarity or the insight it offers into technique or usage. For instance, a lampas silk textile likely from late fifteenth-century Florence (cat. no. 25) shows two exact scenes of the Annunciation that have been re-used to bind a gradual (Fig. 5). For manuscript scholars this is a rare type of binding indeed. Most likely this piece of lampas silk originally decorated either a liturgical vestment or an altar frontal but, at some point in its history, the piece was recycled as a book binding cover (instead of the more usual tooled leather).

Another fascinating example is a red velvet fragment from a chasuble (cat. no. 33) that was woven not in Italy (like the catalog entries presented before and after this piece), but in Ottoman Turkey around 1470–1500 (Fig. 6). The photo of the weaving captures the opulent richness of the textile, yet we soon learn that,
Fig. 6 (Cat. no. 33) A length of red velvet from a chasuble, Ottoman Turkey, c. 1470–1500, silk velvet, Sam Fogg, London. Photo credit: Matt Pia with David Brunetti.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, Turkish weavers began imitating Italian velvets. Even though the Ottoman court required so many luxury fabrics that Istanbul became the largest export market for Italian silks, a local textile industry cropped up in Istanbul and Bursa, producing high-quality textiles, like this piece of red velvet. Interestingly, many of these Ottoman Turkish pieces found their way into ecclesiastical collections in central Eastern Europe, particularly Poland and Hungary. Dr. Garrett notes that “Considering how extensively the use of Italian fabrics at the Ottoman court has been studied, we know very little concerning the importation of Turkish velvets into Europe” (160). This is another instance when a topic for future scholarship is just waiting to be explored.

One roadblock to future scholarship, however, is that there are several objects where absolutely no provenance is listed (cat. nos. 3, 24, 27, 28) and no explanation is offered. This is highly problematic and at least should have been addressed in some form; not
doing so leaves the scholarly reader with a sense of trepidation. Textile historians will be quite familiar with the challenging issues of mapping out a provenance for an object that is highly portable and likely changed hands, as well as function, over the course if its existence. What is a bit surprising is that, considering that so many of the thirty-six catalog entries were originally commissioned for liturgical functions, only one piece (cat. no. 16) possibly comes from a church collection: “By repute from a church near Strasbourg; Private Collection, previously on loan to the chapel at Leeds Castle, Kent” (86). Twenty-four textiles came to Sam Fogg from private collectors and seven from galleries or public collections. Again, most scholars will accept the challenges of an ambiguous provenance, but the issue could have been tackled head on in the introduction to give a greater context to the (mostly unknown) storied histories of these beautiful textiles.

Two textiles in the catalog (cat. nos. 27 and 28) are both so-called “Perugia towels” (so named because of the region from which so many surviving pieces have been found) have no such listed provenance (Figs. 7 and 8, respectively).

These objects are made of costly linen (but not nearly as expensive as pieces like lampas, velvet or tapestry) woven with abstracted blue designs of mythical animals, humans, and other motifs. These rather modest textiles actually appear in various religious scenes—in altarpieces by artists such as Duccio, Simone Martini, the Maestro di San Felice di Giano and Giovanni da Milano, and frescoes by Da Vinci and Ghirlandaio—as tablecloths, altar cloths, dossals, bench cloths, and even clothes used by midwives in scenes of the birth of the Virgin Mary. Dr. Garrett remarks that “Perugia towels can be found in the most humble of domestic settings, such as hanging in the background of a kitchen scene behind a woman frying food [in the Tacuinum Sanitatis, Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, MS. 4182], to the most elevated of religious scenes: a Perugia towel is worn by Christ as a loincloth in Antonio da Fabriano’s Crucifix [Matelica, Museo Piersanti]” (143). One of the most impressive accompanying illustrations in the catalog that demonstrates how a similar textile was portrayed as an embroidered linen tablecloth is seen in Domenico Ghirlandaio’s The Last Supper fresco from around 1486 located today in the Museo di San Marco in Florence (Fig. 9). At the end of the table, we see the highly abstracted blue embroidery motifs (castles, birds, and tress), along with the delicate tassel trimming that ever-so-gently brushes both the floor and the foot of the apostle who looks out toward us. In the second entry (cat. no. 28), Garrett concludes that “Given the quality of the weaving technique, the variety of their motifs, and their prevalence in art of other types that shows their multiple uses, Perugia towels are of a significant historical importance that has yet to be matched by extensive scholarly investigation, with many aspects of the towels remaining enigmatic and ripe for further research” (144, 147).
Fig. 7 (Cat. no. 27) “Perguia towel” with knights and animals, Central Italy, 15th or 16th century, woven linen, Sam Fogg, London. Photo: Matt Pia with David Brunetti.
Fig. 8 Cat. no. 28
“Perguia towel”
with wyverns, griffins and human figures, Central Italy, 15th or 16th century, woven linen, Sam Fogg, London. Photo: Matt Pia with David Brunetti.
Finally, one remarkable textile is a well-preserved altar frontal woven in Spain. The deep-blue velvet—embroidered with a scene of the Virgin and Child and flanking coats of arms—(cat. no. 19) is stunning and offers yet again a taste of what relatively unexplored materials are examined in this catalog. The entry presents the stylistic and iconographic connections between the textile and surviving panel paintings by Aragonese painters such as Lluís Borrassà and Joan Mates, as well as the famous manuscript, *The Hours of Alfonso V*, illuminated by Domingo and Leonardo Crespi in Valencia between 1436 and 1443. The two escutcheons from the velvet illustrate a bundle of what looks like millet (Fig. 10); it is stated that King Alfonso V of Aragón adopted by the early 1420s a bound
Fig. 10 (Cat. no. 19) Embroidered velvet altar frontal with the Virgin and Child accompanied by coats of arms (detail), embroideries are from Spain, Aragón, perhaps Valencia or Barcelona, velvet is from Spain or Italy, c. 1420, Sam Fogg, London. Photo: Matt Pia with David Brunetti.
millet sheaf (*mijo*) as one of his *imprese*. Although there is no archival evidence to support the claim that the two are related—along with the observation that Alfonso’s motif was wispy and uprooted, whereas in the textile they are bushy bundles—it is proposed that the textile’s millet bundles are more closely related stylistically to two surviving blue and white glazed tiles that were made around 1450 in Manises, a town just outside of Valencia (Fig. 11). The connections of the motifs open up the textile field even further by exploring the vast range of media that have striking similarities to textile designs—they also illustrate the
interconnectedness among artists and possible artistic collaborations across the different media.

The catalog could have been more effective if a glossary of technical terms has been included at the beginning — this would have allowed the editors, Paul Holberton and Ksynia Marko, to purge the text of incredibly repetitious technical definitions and explanations. For instance, because the first four catalog entries are all examples of opus Anglicanum, a glossary of terms could have then explained the technique and perhaps provided an overview of why the technique significant and when and where it was popular. Instead, when reading the four catalog entries in succession, one has to re-read the definitions as they are woven into each and every one of the four separate catalog entries. Alternately, a more ideal presentation would have included a heftier introduction to the catalog that could have familiarized the reader with all of the technical terms up front (in a glossary form) and then proceed to offer a detailed explanation of how a given technique was produced, thereby freeing up the text of the catalog entries to include a more robust analysis of the potential deeper meaning of how these textiles were used. If the technical processes were broken down and even complemented by small diagrams (simple line drawings would do the trick) to explain what are — at times — complex weaving patterns, the catalog would impart the viewer with an even stronger understanding of how of these textiles were made (this is true even more for readers not accustomed to textile terminology and techniques). Moreover, the authors then could have more concretely framed the wonderful juxtaposition they offer between these surviving textiles and the corresponding two-dimensional works of art that are used to illustrate stylistic or iconographic similarities, as well as further exploring possible contexts for which the textiles may have been used originally. Aside from these editorial choices, the catalog entries presented by Rosamund Garrett and Matthew Reeves offer a truly stunning array of new material to be explored by scholars.