EMBROIDERIES IN THE FRENCH AND CHINESE TASTE

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An English sixteenth-century poet, telling of unrequited love, speaks of going to his "naked bed"; the adjective rings on our ears with a curious poignancy, the greater, perhaps, because we are not quite sure what it means. Actually, all the poet intended to say was that his bed had no curtains, it was bare to the blasts that, in those days, whirled between door and window and fireplace and made tapestries on the walls and hangings round the bed useful as well as ornamental. The poet, sleeping so unhappily alone, was indifferent to the probable presence in his room of servants and friends, but normally the occupants of a bed would wish to be placed "à l’abri de froid et de l’indiscrétion," as a French scholar has expressed it, and curtains were essential. The result was the great hollow cube of material which formed a dark, comfortable, and private enclosure in what was apt to be a cold, drafty, and much frequented room.

By the year 1700 the necessity for complete coverage had diminished, but the bed was still thought of as a piece of furniture extending upward to a great height; the hangings could shrink to mere horizontal valances round the canopy, with long vertical curtains at the head, but the modern conception of a plain low support for bedclothes and supine bodies was quite unthinkable for any except the very poorest. One result of this idea of the bed was the provision of enormous surfaces which could be decorated, and many records remain of the lavishness with which this was done. Louis XIV had a bed with curtains, canopy, and coverlet all glittering with gold lace, pearls, and gold embroidery; the chairs in the room were upholstered to match and there were five wall hangings of the same work. All were burnt in 1785 to recover the metal.

The Museum is most fortunate to possess, as a recent gift from Judge Irwin Untermyer, a set of valances and curtains, in remarkably fine condition, for a very splendid French bed of about 1700. They are embroideries in silk and wool on canvas in tent stitch of two sizes (a combination often called gros point and petit point); the ground is black and the design a kaleidoscopic blaze of vivid colors, among which red, white, and blue predominate. The medallions, framed in red, show would-be classical figures, sometimes clearly acting out stories from Ovid, sometimes engaged in activities which have defied identification. In the interstices of the sprawling and brilliant foliage that surrounds the mythological scenes are little beasts and birds, usually representing the fables of Aesop and La Fontaine but occasionally reverting to a purely medieval performance, such as the fox in the pulpit preaching to a congregation of fowls. Among the upper branches perch spotted birds, white on red, like peculiarly poisonous toadstools, with half the colors of the rainbow in their wings and tails. In a detail illustrated Orpheus with his beasts, "sequacious of the lyre," is unmistakable; his green dress is almost concealed by a red cloak with white silk highlights. On either side is the fable of the fox and the stork, each of whom, acting as host, was able to cheat his guest out of a meal. The stork’s long-necked vase, which so neatly fitted his own anatomy, is bright blue with white spots.

In black and white photographs the formal design of these embroideries, with the outlining strapwork so typical of the period, is more apparent than it is in the originals; the riotous color has been applied all over without any thought of balance or symmetry, like a richly blooming herbaceous border.

The illustrations, however, of details from another pair of curtains show a decorative de-
Details from an embroidered valance on a state bed, illustrated in the November Bulletin. French, about 1700. Above, a classical hero falling on his spear, with scenes of a cat catching a cock and a fox in a pulpit preaching to fowls. Below, Orpheus with the beasts and the fable of the fox and the stork. Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1953.

Sign which would seem, on a casual inspection, to be close to the end point of the second law of thermodynamics, a completely haphazard arrangement. These curtains, probably likewise from a set of bed hangings, were also received recently as a gift from Judge Untermyer. They are again wool and silk on canvas, this time in large cross-stitch and small tent stitch (silk only),
Detail of an embroidered chinoiserie curtain. French, early xviii century. Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1953
the combination which is gros point and petit point in the strict sense of the phrase. This is the technique usually associated with Madame de Maintenon's school of Saint-Cyr. The layout of the curtains, when studied closely, does actually show a fairly symmetrical arrangement of birds, figures, and beasts, but the designer was oppressed by horror vacui and has filled up every intervening space with swirling shapes, like an artist doodling exquisitely around the printed notices in a telephone booth. The first immediately noticeable thing about these curtains is their brilliant yellow silk ground; on it the most conspicuous colors are blue, green, and red, but a single one of the cloud or mushroom shapes can be in three shades of blue, white, gray, tan, red-brown, bright red, two shades of green, and lavender. Black is used exceedingly sparsely and, as so frequently happens in early fabrics, has often perished, but, with this very minor exception, the curtains are in an unusually perfect state of preservation. Their general effect is much lighter and more sparkling than that of the embroideries of the complete bed previously described.

It is apparent at first glance that the figures are examples of the style known as "chinoiserie." The drooping mustache, the wide sleeve, the over and under skirt had all been made very familiar by the illustrated travel books of the late seventeenth century, but the men and women here, though they hold fantastic implements, are not yet the caricatures of a later period, when the designer will use monkeys or Chinamen indifferently to scramble among his rocaillies. The creator of these curtains probably thought he was making something really and truly Chinese, that his gay and picturesque confusion represented the oriental taste. La Loubère, royal envoy to Siam, wrote in 1688 of a fresco he saw there, that it had "nulle ordonnance et . . . faisait souvenir de nos anciennes tapisseries" (was he thinking of a verdure tapestry, flowers and rabbits scattered with nulle ordonnance?). Even as late as 1743 Attiret, a missionary and painter to the Chinese emperor, wrote: "Chez nous en veut l'uniformité partout et la symétrie. On veut qu'il n'y ait rien de depareillé, ni de déplacé, qu'un morceau réponde exactement à celui qui lui fait face ou qui lui est opposé." But in China, he says, in pleasure houses, "on veut que presque partout il règne un beau désordre, une antisymétrie." Attiret would have been surprised if he could have seen what was actually going on at home in 1743; everywhere his exactly corresponding elements had been replaced by as wild an "antisymétrie" as he had ever seen in China. This change, from the baroque to the rococo, was undoubtedly a natural development in French decorative arts, but, looking at these two sets of embroideries, so close in date and so far apart in organization, it seems very possible that the presence of so much beau désordre must have helped the new style to win its triumphant though short-lived ascendency.

Detail of the matching curtain