

An Elizabethan Sweet Bag

A project decades in the making! A project started so long ago, I don't even know when it was started. (Actually, in looking through old files, it seems that this was started in 2002.)

The entry is an Elizabethan Sweet Bag, which is a highly decorated small purse. There are many extant purses held in museums in the United States and in Europe. I've seen two firsthand, one in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and one in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. There are many examples available to view online. This project was started well before I'd seen any firsthand (and before the ready availability of internet images.)

The project started as a series of classes held by Eowyn Amberdrake (Melinda Sherbing) in her home over the course of a year. In that time, Eowyn taught basic design for sweet bags, stitches needed to complete the project and many finishing techniques such as wrapped cords and tassels. The students in the class each designed motifs for embroidery, transferred designs to linen canvas and started stitching. Unfortunately, my sweet bag kept getting put aside to work on other projects, thus adding years to the completion date.

Sweet bags are found in the 16th and 17th Centuries. I'm not certain if they are a particularly English artifact, but certainly the majority of the sweet bags I've seen are English.

What exactly they were used for seems to be in dispute. There have been sweet bags noted in inventories found with household items such as clothing and bed sheets, said to contain "swete powder", which suggests they were used as sachets. It's not certain though if these sweet bags were decorated.

A number of sweet bags are found listed in inventories as gifts to Elizabeth I which suggests that they were luxury items of the upperclass. The use of silk threads and linings, silver and gold threads contribute to the idea of a luxury item.

They may have been used to carry items, possibly money, as a later version of alms purses.

My primary inspiration for the sweet bag was Eowyn and her class. I doubt I'd seen more than a couple of black and white photos of sweet bags before the class and Eowyn's research and instruction on the topic were fundamental in my interest in needlework.

I never intended to enter the sweet bag in a competition. I just wanted one to have, so my retention of notes on construction are subject to years of working on this off and on.

Most of the techniques and materials used to make my sweet bag are similar to what was used in SCA period. In period, the ground fabric used was linen, the threads for flowers and creatures was silk, the metal threads were thin strips of metal wrapped around a silk core. However, it's likely that the thread count of the linen in period would have been higher, the silk used was probably flat or had very little twist and the metal thread would probably have been a finer quality.

In period, the design would probably have been transferred to the linen using a prick and pounce technique. I believe I used a light box to transfer the design.

The stitching used is pretty much the same the stitches as used in period.

Here's a picture of the sweet bag half-way done.



The flowers and leaves are all done in tent stitch. I did the outlines first. The coiling vines on the finished side above are done with Ceylon stitch. The silver background above was supposed to be encroaching Gobelin, but I wasn't doing it right and stopped and changed the stitch for the other side.



On the top half, the gold coiling stem is done with plaited braid and the silver background is what Jacqui Carey calls Elizabethan Ground stitch.

The centers of the cornflowers have seed beads. The centers of the pansies have 3 gold spangles held down by a gold seed bead.

As it took years to work on, one of the things I began to realize (though I think Eowyn pointed it out at the time) is that most Elizabethan sweet bags had very little “white space”, so on the second side I added more leaves and added a lady bug. I could have probably added more.

Doing all the finishing pieces was a challenge, wrapped cords, tassels, pulls, etc, made more difficult by the social isolation generated by the pandemic. When I found I didn't really have what I wanted to finish the bag, I couldn't run out to the needlework store and buy additional supplies. I had to make do with what I had in the house.

Next time, I do believe I would make the sweet bag rather smaller and would certainly spend more time on the design, adding a lot more elements to it. I'd also like to try using flat silks and more dimensional stitches next time. It would also be good not to cram finishing a piece like this into a few days.

Sadly the photographs of the sweet bag totally fail to capture how shiny the gold and silver threads are. I hope to show it off in person one day.

Sources:

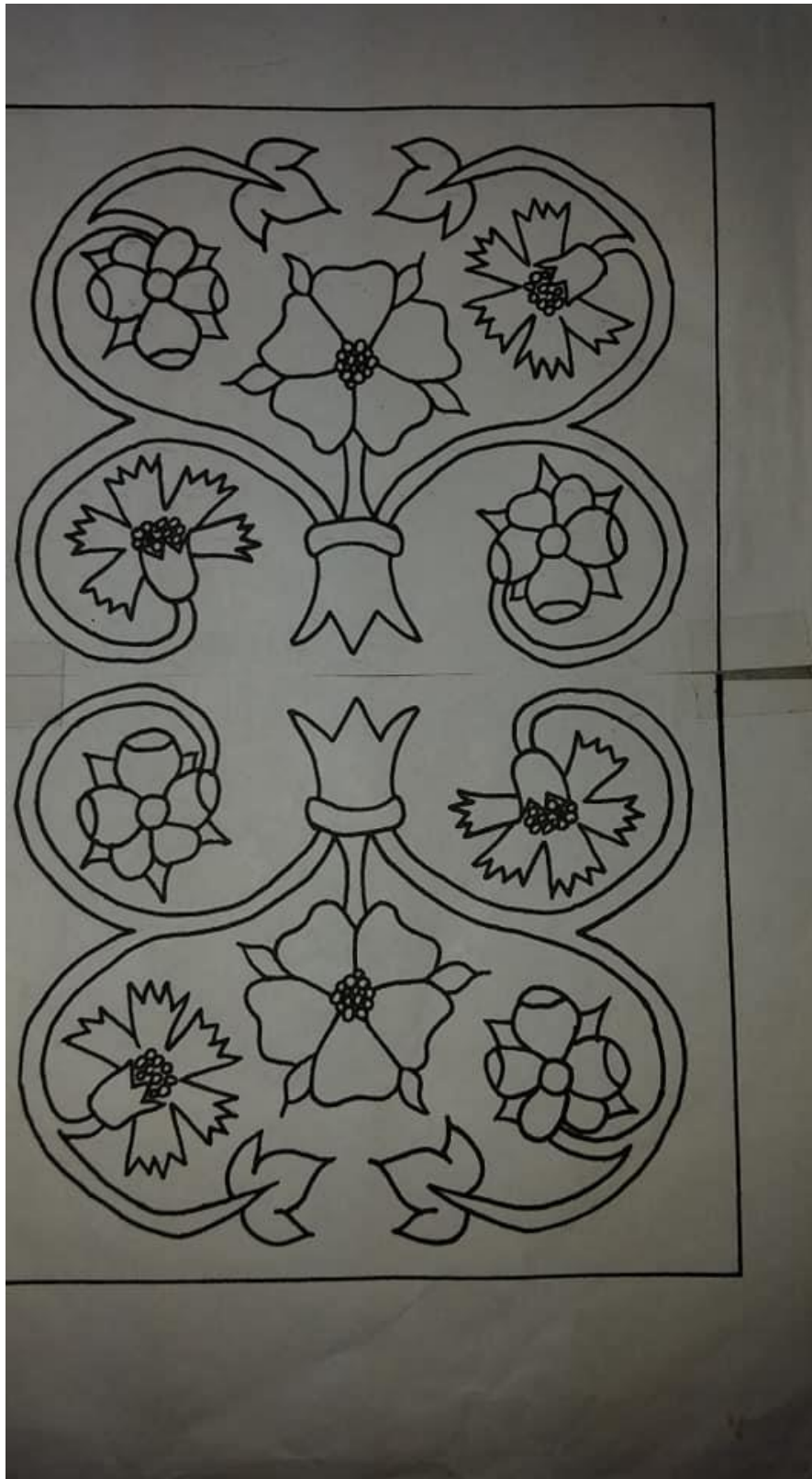
Elizabethan Stitches: A Guide to Historic English Needlework by Jacqui Carey, Carey Company, 2012

Sweet Bags: An Investigation into 16th and 17th Century Needlework by Jacqui Carey, Carey Company, 2009

Sweet Bag Sewed of Silver and Gold: Inspired by Extant 16th and 17th Century English Bags by Melinda Sherbring, Threads of History Press, 2019

An Elizabethan Sweet Bag Richly Embroidered by Melinda Sherbring (Class handout) 2002

An image of the original design:



An image of a color test

