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19 East 74th Street
New York, NY 10021
www.coraginsburg.com

by appointment

tel 212-744-1352
fax 212-879-1601
info@coraginsburg.com

CREWEL EMBROIDERED MUSLIN ROBE À LA FRANÇAISE
French, ca. 1770

Although the form of this *robe à la française* is typical of the late eighteenth century, the grove of cypress trees that adorns it is highly unexpected. Surviving dresses with wool embroidery on cotton or linen are far less common than those embroidered with silk, and are typically ornamented with florals and foliage. Wool chain stitch on cotton or linen was popular for upholstery and hangings in France during this period, and the disposition of the tree motifs and the petticoat's construction suggest that the fabric was produced as yardage, perhaps for furnishing. While dress fabrics were often reused in interiors when they were no longer fashionable, the opposite was not customary practice. The wearer surely made a dramatic statement in her gown with its unusual decoration of Italian cypress trees that evoke the Provencal landscape where the dress was found.

The long slender evergreens are worked entirely in chain stitch with lustrous crewel wool threads in two shades of green, deep blue-green, black, yellow, mustard, umber, and beige. In *L'Art du Brodeur*, published in 1770, Gabriel de Saint-Aubin includes *point de chainette* as one of the many techniques in the professional embroiderer's repertoire, and also notes that it is one "with which many Ladies occupy their leisure." At the time that Saint-Aubin was writing, chain stitch executed with a needle, which required drawing the thread fully through the fabric, had been replaced by the tambour technique introduced from India about ten years prior. As he explained, the material was stretched on a circular wooden frame, called a tambour; with one hand, the embroiderer pushed her hook, or *crochet*, just under the fabric's surface to catch and pull up a loop of thread held in her other hand. She then reinserted the hook with its looped thread slightly farther along the design and repeated the steps. Saint-Aubin's comment that "habit does the rest" conveys the relative ease with which this technique could be mastered. The immediate popularity of tambour embroidery among both professionals and amateurs was due to its efficiency and its association with the exotic East. Saint-Aubin judged that it was "just as accurate and six times more expeditious" than needle chain stitch.

On the open robe, the trees' careful symmetrical arrangement is especially evident across the expanse of the back, where they form pairs along the loose box pleats and regular, widely spaced rows over the panniers. Although readily identifiable as evergreens, their stylized shape and repetition create an impression of geometric abstraction. The predominantly dark motifs stand out against the sheer white Indian muslin ground. Since the mid-seventeenth century, the French East India Companies enjoyed a thriving trade with the subcontinent in which cotton textiles were the major import. The three Crown-operated companies that existed between 1664 and 1770 imported huge shipments of cotton thread and cloth. Finished textiles (as opposed to raw material) constituted a significant volume of trade goods and had the greatest variety and highest value. Although Indian painted-and-dyed and printed cottons were banned by the government between 1686 and 1759 in order to protect the French silk and wool industries, large quantities of plain white cottons—from delicate mulls to hard-wearing, coarse fabrics and mixtures of cotton and silk—continued to arrive in Lorient, the primary port of entry into France for Indian merchandise. Textiles also constituted the largest, most valuable import of the *Compagnie Commercante des Indes*, established in 1770 following the French defeat in the Seven Years War, that operated without a royal monopoly.

Extraordinarily, the gown's original trimming is intact. A graduated ruched band of silk gauze with tiny brocaded cotton sprigs edges the neckline and front opening and matching gauze forms the *sabot* cuffs that became fashionable in the 1770s, replacing the more elaborate lace *engageantes* worn throughout the century. The diminished size of the gown's panniers, the use of chain stitch-embroidered white muslin, and the delicate trimming all speak to changes in the fashionable aesthetic that occurred in the last decades of the eighteenth century favoring greater simplicity.

Collections with crewel chain-stitch embroidered gowns, with floral motifs on linen rather than cotton, include the Metropolitan Museum of Art (French, ca. 1765, 36.95ab) and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (English, ca. 1780–90, M.59.25a–d). A crewel embroidered linen caraco and petticoat is in the collection of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (French, ca. 1785, inv. 2014.54.2).







DRAWNWORK LINEN VALANCE WITH BOBBIN LACE EDGING Russian, late 18th century

The fanciful motifs on this whitework panel reflect the blending of imagery from print sources, folk tales, and everyday life that appears on Russian domestic arts, including lace and embroidery, that flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Lace connoisseur Mrs. Palliser wrote in the *History of Lace* (1875) that “in Russia, lace-making and embroidery go hand in hand . . . Lace-making was not a distinct industry; the peasants . . . made it in their houses to decorate, in conjunction with embroidery, towels, table linen, shirts, and even the household linen.” This charming panel demonstrates the combination of fine linen, drawnwork, embroidery, and bobbin lace discussed by Palliser, presenting a well-preserved example of the type of Russian needlework incorporated into domestic spaces.

Drawnwork pieces of this style were made in the late eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth, and, as is typical, the piece’s composition flows from a central axis, creating a symmetrical frieze of figures, animals, trees, and architectural elements. Tall trees, expanding the full height of the linen, delineate sections that enclose smaller trees, flowers, castles, hunters, birds, dogs, and stags—all densely cohabiting within the space. At each end stands a male figure in courtly dress. This decoration is achieved by beginning with a gridded ground of linen threads, building patterns onto them with outlines, and then completing the designs with a variety of filling stitches. Bobbin lace, as seen here, often provides a border to these cherished linens.

The motifs found on Russian drawnwork meld traditional Russian iconography with Western motifs found in print sources. While on a European tour in the 1690s, Peter the Great encountered the emblem book of Daniel de la Feuille, *Devises et Emblèmes*, which had been published in Amsterdam in 1691, and ordered a Russian translation. The resulting book, *Simvolny i Emblemata*, published in Amsterdam in 1705 and reprinted frequently, had widespread and long-term impact on Russian decorative arts.

Textiles, like this valance, are among the rich products of Russian folk crafts from the past. While its composition may lack the sophistication of professional embroideries, this piece presents qualities of handmade domestic needlework that were to be lost over time. As stated in *Russian Embroidery and Lace*: “With the advance of industrialization, urban influences reached peasant communities, gradually eroding local craft traditions. . . . the traditional designs, embroidered in so many techniques for so long, were almost entirely supplanted by naturalistic patterns of flowers crudely executed in red and black cross stitch.”

It was this decline that led Russian noblewoman Natalia de Shabelsky (1841–1905), during the late nineteenth century, to search for “fast-disappearing ancient national embroideries in the far corners of Russia” in order to preserve them. Objects from her collection were exhibited, in the 1890s, in Russia, France, Belgium, and the United States. In 1931, the Brooklyn Museum staged the exhibition *National Russian Art (De Shabelsky Collection)*. In reference to the inclusion of domestic textiles, the press release stated that “nearly all the objects were manufactures in the home which is the reason that such objects as sheets and towels are listed in the catalogue. However, these were not articles of ordinary use as they were often used for decorative and ceremonial purposes.” In response to the extraordinary qualities of these objects, *Women’s Wear Daily* reported that the exhibition contained “18th-century laces which can hardly be described.”

Viewing this rare piece alongside those that Mrs. Shabelsky preserved presents an array of fantastic imagery—castles and carriages, parrots and peacocks—that envisions an idyllic rural life as captured by the embroiderers’ imaginations and skills. Shabelsky’s collection found homes in museums throughout the United States and elsewhere, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Brooklyn Museum; the Cleveland Museum of Art; the Russian Museum of Ethnography, St. Petersburg; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where comparable valances can be found today (2009.300.3452, 2009.300.3447, and 2009.300.3448, for example).

A similar panel is illustrated in *Embroidered Valances: From the End of the XVIII to the Beginning of the XIX Century*, Irina Boguslavskaya, 2012, pl. 33 and in *Russian Embroidery and Lace*, L. Yefimova and R. Belogorskaya, 1982, pl. 59 and a similar bobbin lace border, pl. 157.

26" H x 76.5" W





ROUND GOWN OF "SILVER MUSLIN"
Probably American (the textile Indian), 1795–1800

In my silver muslin gay,
I shall blaze, superbly drest;
Frisk and flaunt my hours away,
Strut as proudly at the best.

—Thomas Attwood, *Reform'd in Time*, 1798

Although the Indian textiles that initially attracted the interest of Western Europe were the colorful resist-dyed and painted cloths known as "callicoe" and "chints," by the end of the eighteenth century, plain or "clear" Indian muslins overtook them in popularity and price, providing a true blank canvas for any number of fashionably exotic sartorial fantasies, ranging from the romantic to the bucolic.

This round gown or one-piece dress, found in Rye, New York, is a fascinating survivor of a transitional period in the last five years of the eighteenth century when the silhouette of women's clothes underwent a transformation from rounded volume to columnar simplicity. Patterned to maximize drape and minimize cutting into the precious muslin embroidered with hammered silver wire, the two back panels flow directly from the bodice without a seam, releasing elegantly into box pleats along the raised waistline, forming a train behind. A drawstring defines the low scoop neckline, and a tightly fitted falling front bodice secures at the shoulders with pins.

Plain white short-staple muslins—produced for centuries in Bengal to clothe the Mughal court—had been imported to Europe and North America since the late seventeenth century, but their expense limited use to small accessories such as handkerchiefs, fichus, bonnets, and cravats. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, interest in the clinging draperies of antique dress led to a muslin migration from accessory to full garments, exemplified by the chemise dress popularized by the circle of French queen Marie Antoinette in the early 1780s.

In England, where white silks heavily brocaded with silver threads enjoyed popularity in the 1740s and 1750s, a fervor for "silver muslin" boomed in the 1790s. One of the first to adopt the style was Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, who reported to her mother in August 1784 that she had danced in "an English night gown of muslin with small silver sprigs and all white." Silver muslin proved so popular that the English attempted to imitate it, as evidenced by dresses in the Victoria & Albert Museum of muslin with dots of glued silvered paper (T.104-1968) and another embroidered with silver glass beads (T.124-1939). Norwich also produced high-quality woven facsimiles of Indian metallic embroidery.

True *mukesh* or *mukaish* embroidery, a specialty of Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh (northern India) where the craft is still practiced, involves twining a thin strip of pure metal around small groups of cotton threads using the pointed end of the band itself as a needle. Embroiderers follow patterns printed onto muslin using woodblocks or a pricked stencil, and finish the fabric by burnishing the metallic strips with a glass bottle or cowrie shell.

Silver muslin also proved popular in the new American republic. Consumers in port cities such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia eagerly awaited the arrival of imported textiles at regular "India sales." In August 1796, William Holderness of High Street in Philadelphia advertised "some fine India muslins embroidered with gold and silver," and, in January 1799, New York merchants Isaac Moses & Sons heralded the arrival of the latest "Madras & Bengal piece goods" including "gold and silver muslins."

Perhaps the most striking and rare feature of this dress is the pair of cream taffeta sleeves, fitted tightly over the arms and widening at the wrists, with short draped muslin oversleeves, called "epaulettes," caught up with a faceted glass bead at the upper arm. Evolving from menswear-inspired redingotes of the 1780s, tight undersleeves appear to have originated in France, where their adoption coincided with a parallel trend for jacket-like dresses with short sleeves. As the traditional overdress retreated from the front of the body throughout the eighteenth century and gained the appearance of a long jacket worn over a separate garment below, it acquired a litany of exotic provenances steeped in connotations of "eastern" informality. Nicolas Heidloff's *Gallery of Fashion* referred to garments featuring oversleeves worn over long-sleeved dresses or bodices as Russian, Persian, Hungarian, Mameluke, and Circassian robes.

Only one other silver muslin dress with comparable sleeves, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, also American and ca. 1790, is known (1955-98-9); its embroidery is identical to that on a dress in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, dating to ca. 1810 (49.873), also with American provenance. English dresses of the late 1790s in the Deutsches Historisches Museum (KT 92/37) and the Royal Ontario Museum (959.243.6) are made of silver muslins with nearly identical patterns.





MAJO MASQUERADE COSTUME WITH RIBBON TRIM AND LACING Spanish or French, ca. 1775–1800

In eighteenth-century Spain and other European countries, the *majo*—a raffish young man from the urban working classes who sported a colorful, tight-fitting suit with elaborate ribbon trim, a decorative hairnet, black hat, and artfully draped cloak—came to represent quintessential Spanishness. In addition to his distinctive dress, a swaggering masculinity and an attitude of defiance also characterized the *majo*. During a period of rising nationalism in Spain, there was a strong interest in regional traditional dress, and the *majo*'s flamboyant clothing was associated with issues of class, gender, and sexuality, as well as what were perceived as authentic Spanish traits. In 1777, Juan de la Cruz Cano y Holmedilla published his *Coleccion de Trajes de España, Tanto Antiguos como Modernos* that records the diversity of Spanish dress including that of a *majo* barber in his recognizable ribbon-trimmed suit, hairnet, and black hat. *Majos* and *majas*, their female counterparts, appeared as stock characters in popular plays in the last quarter of the century, and artists including Francisco de Goya and Lorenzo Tiepolo painted scenes with these familiar social types, as well as portraits of aristocratic sitters in the guise of *majos* and *majas*.

Majos were also an object of fascination for foreign visitors. In 1760, Joseph Baretta, an administrator at the Royal Academy of Painting in London, traveled to Madrid, where he recorded his impressions of the *majo*, who he summed up as “a low fellow who dresses sprucely, affects the walk of a gentleman, looks blunt and menacing, and endeavours after dry wit upon every occasion.” Barretti also noted the prevalence of *majo*/*maja* costume among aristocrats at masquerades during Carnival.

The popularity of the *majo* crossed the Pyrenees into France, where Spain had long been regarded as a mysterious country steeped in a romantic past. He became widely known in the last quarter of the eighteenth century through the clever, insolent character of Figaro in Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais's plays *Le Barbier de Séville* (1775) and *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1784). Although the first of these plays was well received, it was *Le Mariage de Figaro* that became a sensation. Following its wildly successful first performance at the Comédie-Française in front of a packed house filled with members of the aristocracy, the play spawned a host of feminine fashions, named for both male and female characters including Figaro, Suzanne, and Chérubin, that filled the pages of the *Galerie des Modes* (1778–87) and the *Cabinet des Modes* (1785–86). Both *Le Barbier de Séville* and *Le Mariage de Figaro* were performed numerous times at the Comédie-Française and other Paris theaters into the early nineteenth century. The actor Dazincourt, who performed the leading role in *Le Mariage de Figaro*, wears a strikingly similar costume to this one—accessorized with a blue hairnet, beribboned hat, and guitar—as Figaro in *Le Barbier de Séville*, seen in a colored engraving from the *Petite galerie dramatique*, published in 1799.

Surviving examples of eighteenth-century masquerade dress are exceedingly rare. Although fluidity existed between masquerade and theatrical costume, the magnificent condition of this suit suggests that it was likely worn for fancy dress or perhaps for a private theatrical performance, rather than on the public stage. Its characteristic *majo* elements include the short silk satin jacket—here olive green—with contrasting turn-down collar and small lapels; tight sleeves “slashed” along the inner arm with deep, buttoned cuffs; and efflorescent shoulder trimming. Across the top and upper arm, braided brown, green, and lavender striped silk ribbons, ending in large bowknots and connected by loosely stitched ribbons simulating faux slashing, form an accordion-like epaulette. Bright yellow, red, and white satin ribbon rosettes decorate the back waist, and pale pink and green taffeta ribbon lacing secures the knee breeches. Both the ribbon trim and false slashing evoke early seventeenth-century Spanish dress, details that were revived in the eighteenth century. The shape and floral decoration of the silk-embroidered cotton waistcoat, accented with metal sequins and mirror buttons, are typical of late eighteenth-century men's fashionable dress.

Two comparable *majo* jackets, in the collection of the Musée Galliera, are identified as Spanish (1920.1.777, 1920.1.779); the latter features braided ribbon shoulder trim particularly similar to this example. The Museo del Traje, Madrid, also has two *majo* jackets with similar shoulder decoration (CE001081, CE000561).

Provenance: Ex. collection Helen Larson, purchased from Doris Langley Moore

GOLD-EMBROIDERED SILK DROGUET PANELS FROM A *ROBE DE COUR* French, 1740s

These two joined lengths of richly embroidered blue silk formed the front of a *robe de cour*, or its petticoat, that would have been worn over wide, square panniers. Undoubtedly produced by a highly specialized professional workshop, the embroidery is a complex large-scale pattern featuring serpentine vines ending in scalloped and pointed foliage, scrolling acanthus, swirling stylized spherical flowers, and exotic open blossoms that suggest the mid-century mania for chinoiserie. These motifs are worked in gold metal-wrapped *filé* and *frisé* threads, *lamé* (strip), and purl, many outlined in *frisé*, over the blue silk ground. A variety of techniques are employed including couching, stem and padded satin stitches, with no less than four different forms of *paillettes*—round, crescent, almond, and six-pointed florette—edged with *bouillon* coils. Offset rows of small stylized sprigs and tiny palmettes, connected by curving stems with downturned buds on the base fabric provide a contrasting texture and shimmer.

The design is nearly symmetrical, with subtle and interesting differences between the two panels. For example, the trefoil-shaped flowers near the top, from which thin scrolls of four *filé* threads sprout, mirror each other but are composed of complementary stitches. At left, the central petal is couched with *filé* thread and the two flanking petals with shiny *frisé* thread, while in the corresponding flower at right, these techniques are reversed. Such nuances might reflect two embroiderers simultaneously working on opposite sides of a panel.

No single leaf or flower is worked in one type of stitch, creating a profusion of textures and depth when illuminated by the flicker of candlelight. On a body in motion, this silk would have given the impression of a dynamic and ever-changing pattern, undulating with the movements of its wearer. Moreover, this would have reflected the ornolu-embellished atmosphere in which court dresses were viewed, an effect that is mirrored in the proverbial phrase recorded in the *Dictionnaire universel* (1701) that “those who have gold and embroidery on their clothing . . . are gilt like chalices.” The imposing symmetry and lavish use of precious metals disposed over the rectangular form of these dresses reinforced the hieratic power of the embroidery, elevating the wearer to the status of *objet d’art*.

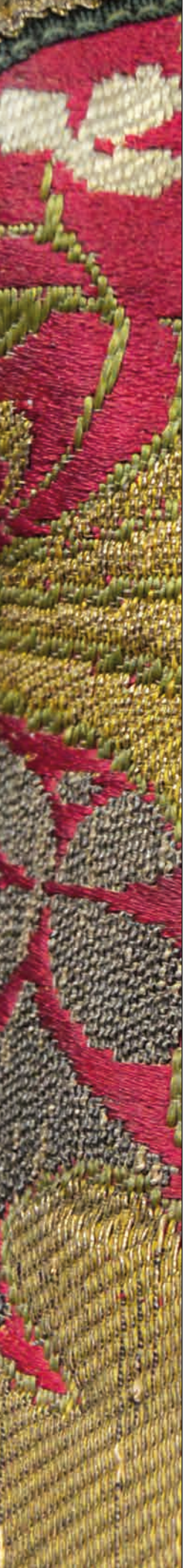
The French embroidery and silkweaving trades were intimately bound in the eighteenth century, both centered in Lyon with smaller operations in Paris. Typically, a silk merchant contracted an embroidery workshop to execute a desired pattern on behalf of a client, although in 1748 the Parisian embroiderer’s guild won the right to sell their work directly to consumers. The designs were generated by professional artists who also created patterns for woven silks. By 1778, some six thousand embroiderers worked in Lyon to supply both French and foreign courts and churches with sumptuous embroidered textiles.

While woven fabrics incorporating metallic threads were generally more expensive than embroidered ones due to the time and labor involved in setting up the drawlooms, throughout the eighteenth century woven silks increasingly coopted motifs originally devised for embroidery. Prized for their dimensionality and the complex mingling of contrasting needle techniques that produced an effect akin to jewelry, embroidered dress silks remained in demand until the Revolution.

Extant court dresses with comparable gold embroidery include a ca. 1745 example thought to be Venetian, formerly from the collection of Rudolf Nureyev and now in the Modemuseum, Residenzschloss Ludwigsburg. Another, of the same date, associated with Huguenot embroiderer Madame Leconte, is in the Victoria & Albert Museum (T.227&A&B-1970). A ca. 1750 English court dress of blue silk woven with silver threads at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (C.I.65.13.1a-c), as well as the dress worn by Anne-Henriette, daughter of Louis XV, in Jean-Marc Nattier’s 1754 portrait at Versailles (MV 3800, INV 6887, AC 2220), are also suggestive of how these panels may have originally appeared when fully realized as a garment.

36.25” H x 36.25” W





PAIR OF BIZARRE SILK SHOES

Probably English, ca. 1720–30; the silk possibly Italian, ca. 1700–20

These elegant and vibrant shoes are a rare survival of the use in English dress of Continental bizarre silks, a useful if not contemporary term that refers to their eccentric patterns incorporating obscure architectural, floral, and orientalized motifs, as well as unidentifiable forms. Their curvaceous Louis heel, pointed upturned toe, and white kid rand, are typical of the finest shoemaking practices of the 1720s. The adept cobbler finished the throat, lachets, heel back, and elongated dog-leg seam with forest-green silk ribbon and passementerie in metallic threads, lining the interior and lachets in supple white kid leather, with insoles of brown leather.

The silk is of a raspberry-red satin, brocaded with oversized, stylized foliage in gold and silver *filé* and *frisé* threads and naturalistic flowers in hues of blue, white, pale pink, and mauve with pale chartreuse leaves. An exaggeratedly large scallop-edged leaf, overlaid with a pointed leaf resembling holly or dandelion foliage, appears, adroitly mirrored, over the vamp and tongue of each shoe. At the side, abstracted quatrefoil motifs in silver *frisé* threads float in the interstices of the flora. Diminutive blue and white tulips, light green leaves, and a turquoise, silver, and gold flower grace the toe. Across the lachets are two varieties of white daisies framed in blue, and near the heel of one shoe is a pink and mauve daisy with golden pistil.

The distinctive scalloped and sharp-edged foliage, with delineated ribs and diamond-oriented ground elements, paired with the somewhat realistically rendered flora, relate to flowers on silks thought to be from Venice, as on an altar frontal preserved at the Museo della Cattedrale, San Gimignano, or possibly to silks from Lyon, like one length at the Abegg-Stiftung (1792).

If not for their discovery in England, these shoes, and their silk, might be thought to be French, but given England's ban on the importation of French silks enacted in 1706, and even with a flourishing black market for such goods, the present brocade may be of Italian origin. Likewise, Italian furnishing fabrics are well documented in early eighteenth-century England, when large-scale "damasks and Italian silks," as they were advertised in the newspaper *Post Man* in 1710, were frequently imported for use as bed hangings, upholstery, and wall coverings.

Two pairs of English shoes of bizarre silk, and of a similar profile, are in the collection of the Powerhouse Museum (H4448-51, H4448-54). Other related English shoes include those preserved in the Snowhill Wade Costume Collection, Gloucestershire (NT 657437; NT 1348825.1, 2) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1992.273a, b). A mantua of about 1708 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1991.6.1a, b); and a man's banyan at the Victoria & Albert Museum (T.281.1983) also provide evidence of the vogue for using bizarre silks in fashionable English dress.

Provenance: Ex. collection Helen Larson, purchased from Doris Langley Moore





SILK EMBROIDERED COLCHA
Indian (Bengal) for the Portuguese market, second half of 17th century

The second half of the seventeenth century was a period of intense aesthetic convergence, as the courtly styles of empires across the globe met, exchanged, and diverged in an endless cycle of reciprocal appropriation. With its panoply of lush floral vines and foliage, this embroidered *colcha* is a testament not only to the skill of the Indian craftsmen who created it, but also to the commingling of several distinct yet interrelated styles from Europe, India, and regions between.

Embroidered in chain stitch with a tambour hook or *ari* on a deep blue satin ground, this *colcha* displays a dense network of symmetrical yet flowing floral vines, incorporating stylized tulips, peonies, lotuses, carnations, and whimsical blossoms. Borders, enclosing a rhythmic succession of balanced flowerheads, separate the panel into nine rectilinear sections. At the center, an octagonal medallion contains two birds, of ambiguous significance, craning their necks to reach the nectar inside two yellow flowers, set atop four round motifs (possibly a misinterpreted coat of arms). Wide-eyed “wild men,” with pointed beards and curled mustaches, clad only in leafy loincloths and European hats, appear at the corners.

Portuguese merchants were the first and most successful European exploiters of the Indian subcontinent’s rich heritage of embroidery, beginning with the capture, in 1510, of Goa, subsequently the administrative capital of the country’s overseas empire, the Estado da Índia (State of India). Seeking allies in the fight to hold off the Mughal power to the north, the sultanates of Bengal, on the northeast coast, and Gujarat, on the northwest, gave the Portuguese trade concessions, allowing Europeans entry into an already thriving Eastern trade network. Bengali embroideries, both *colchas* and garments of undyed white cotton embroidered with wild tussar silk, were the first to reach Europe. Working with middlemen, the Portuguese soon learned to adapt these objects for the thirsty European market, introducing complex figural imagery mined from European prints and adding silk linings and fringes. Commonly translated as “bedcover,” the Portuguese term *colcha* is far more inclusive, as these embroideries could be hung on walls, as a substitute for more expensive tapestries, or used on floors and tables, as was probably the case for this example. In Portuguese palatial contexts, *colchas* likely decorated the *estrado*, a low dais or platform fitted with furniture and textiles.

Most scholarly attention has focused on deciphering the sources and meaning of the often obscure iconography of early Bengali pieces. Those embroidered primarily in colorful *Bombyx mori* silks with floral compositions—traditionally ascribed to Gujarat—have received comparatively little serious consideration, due to the perception that they are decorative pieces created for a widening mass market. Nonetheless, an intriguing mixture of cross-cultural influences, and the shifting state of Indian colonial dominance, is particularly evident in their designs. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the English became the main power in Indian-European trade, moving the center of colonial administration from Goa to Bombay, part of the dowry of their Portuguese queen, Catherine of Braganza. The floriated style that became prevalent is a complex mingling of international decorative styles, influenced by the Northern European fashion for floral still-life paintings, botanical prints, and floral marquetry, and the Mughal court style of Bombay, which had, in turn, developed its own reciprocal taste for European goods, embroidery in particular. The “wild men”—apparently unique to this *colcha*—may be derived from Germanic tapestries and prints.

Yet the most potent influence on this and other floral *colchas* was probably the so-called Louis XIII carpets—made by the French royal carpet manufactory, known as the Savonnerie in the mid-seventeenth century—themselves an attempt to imitate and surpass Persian examples. They typically feature lush florals on dark green or brown backgrounds, and, like *colchas*, could be used on tables. A Savonnerie carpet of very similar design and layout to this *colcha* is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1982.60.80).

Some scholars maintain that *colchas* of this type were probably made in Bengal, the descendants of the unusual ones produced there on dark blue silk, such as the prototypical example in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon (Inv. 4593 tec). The chain stitches on this piece indeed do not resemble the minute *mochi* work of Gujarat, but rather the later *kanthas* produced in Bengal. A small group of similar *colchas*, on indigo-blue satin ground with octagonal central medallions and nearly identical floral motifs, suggests a common workshop operating in the latter half of the seventeenth century, probably in Satgaon (for example Rhode Island School of Design, 1996.99 and Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, 4594 Tec).

121" H x 90" W

CREWELWORK BED CURTAIN

English, ca. 1700–20

Bed hangings of woven wool and densely tent-stitched canvas with biblical or mythological scenes had been fashionable in England during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but the newly airy and vibrant embroideries produced during the reigns of William and Mary (1689–94/1702) and Ann (1702–7) took their cue from increasingly available cottons from India. Amateur needlewomen interpreted the gaiety and Eastern motifs found in these expensive chintzes in the traditional material of the English embroiderer, wool, specifically long-staple worsteds known since the fifteenth century as crewel. In 1698, diarist Celia Fiennes found in the queen's closet at Windsor Castle "hangings, chaires, stooles and screen the same, all of satten stitch done in worsteds, beasts, birds, ymages and ffuites all wrought very ffinely by Queen Mary and her Maids of Honour."

Worked predominantly in stem and satin stitches over five narrow lengths of cream twill linsey-woolsey (fabric with a linen warp and wool weft), this curtain served as a showcase for the embroiderer's unusual prowess with the needle, as well as the pattern drawer's extraordinary skill. Selective use of chain stitch brings texture and dimension to the swirling branches of the fantastical shrubbery, while the dense knots at the centers of the flowers and fruits sensually evoke seeds and pollen. Despite the intricacy of the forms—nearly all of the leaves have curling serrated edges—they are executed with crisp accuracy and a deft command of color that prevents any sense of monotony throughout the pattern, which repeats twice across the width of the curtain. Its size indicates that this panel would have originally wrapped around one of the posts at the foot of a tester bed, forming a suite with narrower curtains at the head, matching valances, and possibly a headcloth and cushions.

While most of the crewelwork bed curtains that survive from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries retain a charming naiveté of design and execution, this example is remarkable for its grace and fluidity. The sinuous branches are worked with shades of pink, as well as brown and beige, blending with the red hues of the flowers to create a harmonious whole. A mixture of recognizable European flowers, including roses and fritillaria, cede ground to a series of fantastical floral motifs, imbued with liveliness due to the embroiderer's use of long-and-short stitch to fuse complementary hues.

By the nineteenth century, heavy embroidered bed curtains went out of fashion as standards of hygiene, heating, and modes of living changed. In the early twentieth century, a generation of British merchant-class collectors became interested in rediscovering, and recreating, a pseudo-aristocratic past in newly available country homes, eagerly seeking out old English crewelwork to evoke the seventeenth century. Those lucky enough to find genuine examples often cut and reapplied the embroidery onto new ground fabrics for use in "antiquarian" interiors. In 1928, *Country Life* advocated abandoning all-white bed clothes for colorful embroideries, brocaded silks, and printed textiles: "On oak bedsteads and among oak furniture, Jacobean crewel work suitably mounted is most effective, or printed designs in the same tradition, which can be found in abundance on grounds of soft ecru shade."

Remarkably, a set of two bed curtains with an identical pattern survives in the collection of Packwood House, Warwickshire, part of the National Trust (557874.1.2). Worked on a larger scale, in a somewhat cruder technique, these embroideries (one made into a bedcover) were probably drafted by the same pattern drawer who designed the present curtain, but do not appear to be part of the same set. In 1904, Birmingham industrialist Alfred Ash purchased Packwood, the historic estate of the Fetherstone family from the sixteenth century, at auction as a present for his sixteen-year-old son Graham Baron Ash (1889–1980). In the 1920s and 1930s, the younger Ash painstakingly created a private haven of the idealized English country house there. Upon presenting Packwood to the National Trust in 1941, Ash mandated that his interiors remain exactly as he had left them. He placed the crewelwork bed curtains on a "Jacobean" tester bed in the Ireton bedroom, where they have remained since.

A matching curtain is in the collection of the Cincinnati Museum of Art (1993.132). Bed curtains with a strikingly similar pattern, embroidered ca. 1713 in Massachusetts, in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (31.694, 1972.910), demonstrate the international popularity of this style.

75" H x 96" W







PAINTED-AND-DYED COTTON CURTAIN PANEL Indian for the English market, 1720s

The indelible colors of Indian painted cottons, or chintz, is precisely what made them such valuable, sought-after commodities. Distinctive floral designs, either muscular or graceful, were rendered by *kalamkars* (painters) in deep blues and reds, resplendent purples, and blushing pinks illuminated against pristine white grounds. Whether for use in apparel or furnishings, chintzes both followed Western tastes and spurred exotic imitations in Europe. This panel, of fine, plain-weave cotton, embodies two concurrent themes in global textile commerce: keeping up with consumer demands for au courant Asian export goods and the attempted unraveling of the science behind the art of Indian textile dyeing.

In scale and layout, this design is comparable to European lace-pattern brocaded silks, which were most fashionable in the 1720s. The pattern unfurls over two joined panels, with an elongated twenty-five-inch vertical repeat and relatively compact fourteen-and-a-half-inch pattern width. Rippling green streamers (the white undersides embellished with feathery purple strokes) form arches above fanning flower petals and delicate sprays. Below, curvaceous bands with deep red, scalloped foliate motifs terminate in a frilled palmette, a dramatic element which serves to join the repeat. Curling extensions of the green ribbons, entwined with leafy red-and-pink lobes, simultaneously sprout from and support the arched portion. Despite minor variations attributable to freehand painting, the pattern follows a consistent repeat, likely achieved through pouncing—or by copying a woven silk. Though more abstract and less florid than most lace patterns, this chintz would have been as fashionable as its European counterparts, provided it was made and traded by merchants quickly enough to keep up with evolving tastes.

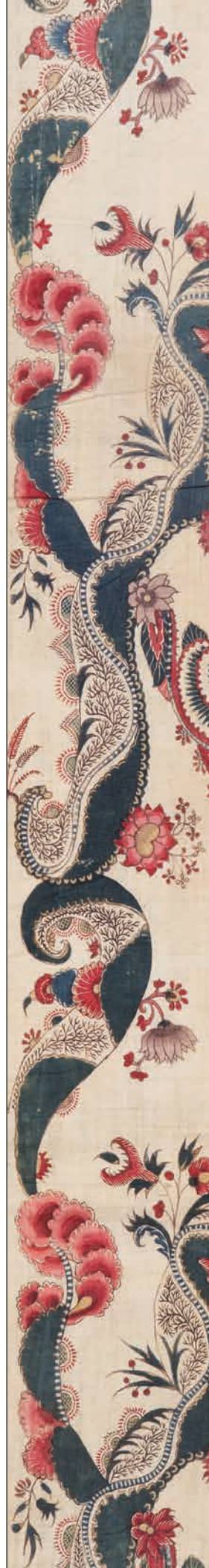
The most remarkable aspect of this curtain is the predominance of a rich, velvety green in the undulating streamers. Green is not typically found in extant chintzes, reflecting the limitations of even the most skilled Indian artisan—and the audacity of the merchant who commissioned this coloration—because it was known to fade. A letter written in 1742 by Father Coeurdoux, a French missionary stationed in India, outlines the nearly ten-part process of preparing, drawing, color formulating, mordanting, painting, resisting, vat dye immersing, bleaching, and finishing chintzes. Each stage is built on chemical reactions at a molecular level, but the precise, scientific mechanics underpinning chintz production had yet to be quantified by Indian or European dyers. In one of the final steps, Coeurdoux addresses the achievement of green:

[T]ake a *palam* (or a little more than an ounce) of *Cadou* flower, the same amount of *Cadou*, a handful of *Chaiaver*, and, if you require a very fine green, add the rind of a pomegranate. Having reduced these ingredients to a powder, put them in three bottles of water, which has to be boiled until it has lost three quarters of its volume. Empty this dye into a vessel . . . Into each bottle of the dye put half an ounce of powdered alum; shake the bottle for some time, and the colour is completed. If this colour is painted upon blue, you will get green.

Advance indigo dyeing was requisite to obtain green; painting this same mixture on a white ground yields yellow. There are very few color-fast yellow dyestuffs, but the tannins in pomegranate rinds and myrobalan (*cadou*) fruits and galls are scientifically confirmed to produce effective yellows, as Coeurdoux noted. He warned “this green will not hold like the blue and the red” and that repeated washings would erase the fugitive yellow tint. (He further described a banana-tree root fixative, noting that diminished beauty in verdancy was the price for permanence.) Here, the blue is indeed visibly brilliant on the textile’s reverse, and the yellow applied to the same areas on the face remains embedded in the cloth, preserving a green as striking today as it was almost three centuries ago.

This panel is from a set of four curtains; a matching panel bearing the merchant insignia of the English East India Company is in the Minneapolis Institute of Art (2014.3.1). The provenance of the suite, however, is France, underscoring the circuitous, and sometimes clandestine, commercial networks these prized fabrics passed through in Europe despite protective measures banning their importation.

119" H x 64" W



GIRL'S SILK SPENCER TRIMMED WITH FRINGE French, ca. 1811

For fashion-conscious women in early nineteenth-century Paris and beyond, Pierre de la Mésangère's *Journal des Dames et des Modes* (1797–1839) was an indispensable resource. Published every five days, the magazine included short articles on social and cultural events, theater, and literature. Its all-important regular column, "Modes," and accompanying hand-colored engraving of the latest feminine styles charted the regular changes in garment and hat details, colors, fabrics, and trimmings.

From the end of the eighteenth century through the 1820s, spencers, typically associated with riding and menswear, were an integral component of women's wardrobes. These short jackets were supposedly named for George John Spencer, 2nd Earl Spencer (1758–1834), who, according to an apocryphal story, adapted his coat after the tails were burnt in a fire or torn off while hunting. In January 1811, the *Journal* column, *Le Rôdeur* (The Prowler), noted women's partiality for both spencers and redingotes, which they insisted on wearing only when one or the other was out of fashion with men. That December, the satirical column *Le Centyeux* (The Hundred Eyes) observed that women had adopted from young men gaiters, cravats, hats, and spencers, as well as bold strides and offhand manners.

This green silk taffeta spencer, generously trimmed with matching twisted silk fringe, closely corresponds to the editor's observations regarding the popularity of different shades of green and fringe trimming from the latter months of 1810 through 1811. Plate 1101, from late 1810, illustrates a woman wearing a nearly identical green spencer with matching fringe on the standing collar, cuffs, and shoulders, a gently flared white cotton gown, and a black straw hat. On January 15, 1811, the editor announced that "one puts fringe on spencers first," as well as other forms of outerwear including redingotes and *douillettes* (wadded coats). In mid-April, he noted a preponderance of green and pink spencers over white dresses at Longchamp, the traditional site of display for the newest spring fashions, a trend that continued into the fall. In November, he maintained that "spencers with white dresses are still, despite the bad weather, more numerous than colored [i.e. wool] dresses and redingotes" and that the "essential points" of a fashionable ensemble comprised a large gauze *fraise* (ruffled collar) and a spencer trimmed with fringe at the upper arm and around the waist. He also specified the "rule" for colors and fabrics, noting that *gros vert* (deep green) was used for spencers made of *florence*, a lightweight silk taffeta similar to this example, while *vert-olive* was used for spencers of merino wool. In spite of the widespread vogue for green, an 1811 article entitled "Détails de L'Habillement" advised women with "pale, delicate, and melancholy" faces to avoid strong colors including *le gros vert*, which yellowed their complexions, giving them a sickly air.

This spencer's small size indicates that it was made for an adolescent girl, and the light padding in the fronts and back suggests that it was worn in the cooler months. It was customary among the wealthy bourgeoisie for girls to be dressed in adult styles. Given its remarkable similarity to both descriptions and plates in the *Journal*, it is tempting to speculate that the wearer's mother consulted the pages of the periodical in selecting her daughter's ultrafashionable winter outer garment. The spencer's high rounded collar and jaunty epaulettes illustrate the romantic influence on fashion, referred to as *le goût gothique*, which emerged around 1810 and drew on historical styles of the fifteenth through early seventeenth centuries. The visual interest is concentrated at the back, which shows to advantage the prominent collar reinforced with an interior wire along the upper edge and ruched band of self-trimming around the base of the neck; the deeply set-in sleeves that create an elongated diamond shape; the soft pleats that terminate in delicate self-covered spherical buttons; and the fringed epaulettes and hem. The expert construction and refined sewing attest to the skills of an accomplished professional dressmaker.

The young *élégante* in her fringe-trimmed green silk spencer, perhaps worn with a flounced white cotton dress, wide-brimmed hat, and *fraise*, would not have been out of place among the similarly dressed fashionable women seen promenading in the Tuileries gardens by the *Journal's* editor in January 1811.



QUILT OF CREWELWORK, PRINTED COTTONS, AND WOOLS
American (Connecticut), ca. 1775–1800; the embroidery ca. 1725–75

The unidentified maker of this New England quilt put careful consideration into its composition to create aesthetic harmony and symmetry, while also maximizing efficient use of valuable fabrics. Its squares contain crewelwork on linen, as well as six block-printed wools and cottons, on a backing of cotton and wool, probably homespun. The centermost element contains an incomplete embroidered carnation enclosed by four rectangles of cotton printed with stylized foliate stripes. At the four corners are tiny pieced squares of an *indienne* depicting roses, spiky flowers, and carnations. Bordering this are squares of striped and flowered cotton alternating with four more crewel floral sprays, laid out so as to create a symmetrical arrangement of flora, enclosed by a border of three alternating printed cottons and wools.

Worked in crewel yarns in no fewer than eight types of stitches, in a spectrum of hues, as well as white silk, the embroidery comprises most of the left and bottom portions of the quilt. Spiky stylized carnations, pineapple-shaped blossoms, oversized sepals and stamens, and leafy pink-ribbed acanthus float on a natural linen ground. At the bottom these flowers alternate with bunches of strawberries, with the leftmost flowers having been replaced with strawberries, the flowers probably reserved for reuse in the quilt's central element. Such whimsical floral motifs had their ultimate design source in Indian painted-and-dyed cottons or silk-embroidered coverlets, known in America through English crewelwork.

Closer examination reveals that the embroidered elements were originally executed to form panels of a woman's dress. The repurposing of textiles, especially in the making of quilts, was common practice from the eighteenth century, and several examples of reused crewelwork survive. A quilt at Colonial Williamsburg recycles what were probably once bed hangings (1974-193), and two Connecticut-made quilts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, from about 1775, are remade from a skirt and bed hangings (22.55, 2000.205). On the present example, three of the large lengths of embroidery comprised the hem of the skirt, delineated by the strawberries. Unusual, however, are the pieced fragments at the top left, which formed the dress's double sleeve ruffles, which, when reconstructed, reveal one set of sleeves to have a scrolling vine of spherical buds; on the second set are three types of flowers stitched as a mirror image to the matching sleeve.

Found in Belmont, Massachusetts, which in the eighteenth century included parts of Arlington, Watertown, and Waltham, the quilt has been associated with the family name Currier; but without a first name or other information, it is difficult to identify a specific maker. However, the embroidery is characteristic of work executed in the Connecticut colony. The most closely related crewel motifs are found on a ca. 1725–75 petticoat from the northwest part of the region in the collection of the Connecticut Historical Society (2010.282.0). Although the flowers and fruit are softer and more naturalistic, there are distinctive elements to relate it to the quilt, such as boteh-shaped buds and spheres sprouting from stems and patches of earth. Sets of Connecticut bed hangings preserved at the Connecticut Historical Society (1962.28.2) and the Prentis House, Shelburne Museum also share many motifs.

While some of the flora are seen on bed hangings from Massachusetts, a Connecticut provenance is also supported by the quilt's construction from a garment. Extant colonial costume worked in crewel is almost all attached to Connecticut; a ca. 1732 dress is today divided between the Wadsworth Atheneum and the Connecticut Historical Society (1910.25, 1950.518.0), and the mirror-image effect of embroidery when on a body, visible here on the sleeve ruffles, is seen on a boy's jacket from about 1760 at the Connecticut Historical Society (1978.104.0) and a child's dress at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (54.124).

The central medallion's four floral squares are matched, suggesting the quilter used part of the bodice or upper dress, where symmetry would have been most visually pleasing, while the diversity of the flowers on the part forming the skirt illustrates the embroiderer's skill and creativity, much like a ca. 1759 Hartford dress worked in silk on linen at the Wadsworth Atheneum (1973.61).

The richness, energy, and quality of this embroidery undoubtedly made it worthy of preservation. Repurposed by the quiltmaker to grace a bed, it is an exceptional survival illustrating imaginative and economical recycling of dress elements.

89.5" H x 87.5" W





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RESEARCH AND TEXT

Martina D'Amato
William DeGregorio
Donna Ghelerter
Michele Majer
Leigh Wishner

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PHOTOGRAPHY

Michael Fredericks
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by appointment

19 East 74th Street
New York, NY 10021
www.coraginsburg.com

tel 212-744-1352
fax 212-879-1601
info@coraginsburg.com





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