

The Benefit of Wear: An Analysis of Damaged Needlework

by Christy Gordon Baty and Erin Harvey Moody

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All photos by Christy Gordon Baty. Psalter from the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library. Sternhold, Thomas. *The whole booke of Psalmes/ collected into English meeter by T. Sternhold, I. Hopkins and others.* London: Imprinted for the Company of Stationers, 1635. Folger Shakespeare Library: STC 2662, copy 2.

When you experience a museum exhibition, you are stepping into the middle of a well thought-out story. The display cases are mindfully arranged for viewability and flow; each item in the case is carefully lit, the descriptions give details about dates, origins, and materials used. The item on display is a pristine piece, the best example of the story.

However, if you get the chance to visit the archives of a museum, you will have a markedly different experience. You will see bank after bank of flat drawers filled with fragments, pieces that will never lay in the careful displays of an exhibition or be photographed for a book. The vast majority of embroidered items left to us from history are frayed, worn, and faded leftovers too precious to discard but not valuable enough to be awarded space in the exhibit case.

A curator's job is to tell a story through the museum exhibition. Curators choose the pieces that are the very best examples of that narrative. When you view an exhibition, you are consuming a highly managed and edited version of history. The exhibitors want to present what is the most evocative of a period or type; they want to show the best examples. A curator or author is rarely



Figure 1. Back cover of the Psalter from the Folger Shakespeare Library, circa sixteenth century

interested in displaying the distressed fragment. But to a needlework historian, it's the crushed and bruised, the worn and weary items that can tell the richest story.

If you have the opportunity to visit a collection to do your own research, you will be directing your own narrative. Don't miss the best pieces: You definitely want to see the finest items of the collection of exceptional quality, excellent color, and the most intact stitching. But also be sure to ask for the distressed items that would rarely be brought out. They can tell another story.

A perfect example of a worn out beauty is a sixteenth-century Psalter with an embroidered bookbinding in the Folger Shakespeare Library's collection. A Psalter is a dedicated collection of the Book of Psalms from the Old Testament, sometimes bound together with other devotional materials. There are other embroidered bookbindings in the Folger's collection that are in far better shape and aren't dirty or missing entire sections of needlework. While making it an unattractive choice for a museum exhibition, it is precisely this worn condition that makes this item a fascinating piece to study.

Interestingly, the wear on both the front and back covers is almost identical. However, there is a fraction more wear on the back. A few stitches are slightly more unraveled in several places. This minimal, almost undetectable amount of additional damage better serves our purposes and provides a slightly clearer glimpse into the understitching that will be covered in detail in this article. Furthermore, in the center motif of the front cover is a small pin which was added at some point, presumably to stabilize the embroidery. The use of pins and other techniques to stop further degradation is a fascinating but separate topic for study. For these reasons, we will be focusing on the back cover.

THE BIRTH OF AN EMBROIDERED BOOKBINDING

As a historian, you have to be aware of your own biases and of current cultural biases when conducting research on an item. You let it tell its own story and avoid approaching it with a preconceived idea. When sitting at an examination table and viewing a piece closely, it is important to understand the cultural context of that piece.

For instance, during the mid-seventeenth century, the time in which the Folger Psalter cover was embroidered, women on the lower end of the social scale would not have had time to teach their daughters an art like embroidery. Entire families that were not members of the gentry and classes above did a tremendous amount of manual labor to maintain a farm or small business, put food on the table, and provide basic clothing and other necessities of everyday living. These women taught their daughters how to cook, make or repair clothes, and manage chickens, and every girl in the household would be actively spinning during any "down" time.

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Figure 2. Front cover of the Psalter from the Folger Shakespeare Library, circa sixteenth century

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Only women of the more affluent leisured classes had the time and resources to teach their daughters and other girls of their household how to do fine, decorative needlework, which they valued as an art, a display of status, and a source of gifts to wield social influence.

Therefore, when looking at the Folger Psalter, we know that it belonged to a member of the gentry or nobility, not to a farmer or laborer or working merchant. It was certainly not the work of a peasant girl, who was not taught to read and spent her day slopping pigs, milking cows, and tending to the younger children in the family.

On the other hand, we can suppose that this book was not created or owned by someone at the very top end of the social strata. We can make this assumption because there is a very limited provenance for this book (see *Tracking Down Provenance*, page 31). This lack of story provides its own sort of explanation of origins. We can reasonably suppose that this was not the work of a very highly placed person or someone of distinction because if it were, this book would have been recorded by a household steward in the annual inventory, kept with other valued family possessions and passed on as a part of that collected heritage.



Figure 3. Corner detail of Psalter back cover

If the family had suffered financial hardship and made the decision to sell off family heirlooms, they would have included the provenance which would have made the item more valuable and lucrative. If this book had been so highly valued as to be given as a gift to an influential person, it would have been recorded as received in their inventories. For instance, the Bible that Elizabeth Tudor (later Queen Elizabeth the First) embroidered and gave to her stepmother, Katherine Parr, was carefully maintained and tracked. This Psalter was not.

The book is diminutive at only 2" x 3", which is the perfect size to fit in the palm of a hand. A Psalter was intended to be a very private, intimate item. The Folger Psalter was not placed upon a pillow and admired publicly, but was carried around, read, touched, and rubbed. Imagine this book being cradled in the hands of a young lady, encouraged by her mother to read Psalms during her morning contemplation.

QUALITY OF THE MATERIALS

In Figures 1 and 3, pages 28 and 30, respectively, you can clearly see the wear in the corners. The silk ground has been rubbed away, making the evenweave linen underneath visible. This type of wear will be familiar to anyone who has repeatedly stuffed a book into a backpack or pocket. A book carefully placed on a shelf and opened only on a table would not display corners that are crushed down and worn away. We begin to see a history of usage

which lets us know that this book was handled frequently and even roughly.

The linen backing underneath the silk provides weight and structure for the needlework. The silk satin which was chosen to be the ground for the embroidery is of a "Goldilocks" quality: neither too light nor too heavy. If the satin were any more lightweight, it would have completely disintegrated. A heavier silk would have stood up over time and far less of the undercloth would have shown. This was a modest amount of cloth in a modest but practical weight. Even this choice tells us something about its origins. If this had been a professionally commissioned piece, it would undoubtedly have been executed with the finest materials on a heavier piece of satin. A patron already spending money on a finely embroidered bookbinding would not have economized on the satin.

In addition, while the design is attractive, a professionally commissioned piece would have been mounted with greater care with an eye to better symmetry. The main motif, for example, is not centered, and the cover is wider at the bottom than at the top. Therefore, we can take another step in our story and conclude that this was a domestically produced bookbinding, of somewhat middling but not cheap quality.

Further reflecting our conclusion of the book's moderate origins, the silver gilt used throughout the entire embroidery shows a tremendous amount of oxidation, turning from what would have originally been bright gold

TRACKING DOWN PROVENANCE

Provenance is the technical term used by historians and other researchers to denote authenticity through origins and ownership. In the accession records for the Folger Shakespeare Library Psalter, a note states "Autograph: Maria Elizabeth Archer Briggs," meaning that that Maria's name is written inside the book. No information about the cover is provided in the records.

Upon further research, we found that Maria Elizabeth Archer Briggs, nee Julian, was born 1795, married Thomas R. A. Briggs in August, 1833, and died November 21, 1862.

The book itself was printed for the Company of

Stationers in 1635, thereby giving us a *terminus post quem*, an earliest possible date of creation. The style and execution of the embroidery fits within the date of the book's publication. These dates tell us that Maria Briggs would not have been the cover's needleworker, just one of the many owners of this small book. It is possible that this book was passed down through Maria's family, mother to daughter. Maria certainly was proud enough of this possession to inscribe her name in the book.

Unfortunately, while this information provides us some information about ownership, it is an incomplete provenance and does not lead us to a definitive origin.

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to a dirty and dull brown/grey or almost black. This would lead us to conclude that the silver gilt was of a lesser quality because it has tarnished severely. The tarnishing is uniform due to general exposure and not specific wear.

For example, the inside of the bullion coils and the underside of the metal stitching, which would not have been touched, are just as worn and dirty as more highly handled areas. While silver gilt was not a cheap item, it does point away from “best” quality materials. We can assume that these materials were either bought by a family of middling means or given to an embroiderer that hadn’t yet graduated to using the most expensive options. Of course, both of these situations could exist at the same time as well.

Our information about the quality of the materials, the tarnished silver gilt and the lighter weight satin, tells us that this is a relatively modestly priced, though not cheap, item to produce. Quite possibly this was a tour de force finished piece done by a young lady of a gentry-class family with enough disposable income to purchase silver gilt and silk satin. She would have been supervised in this endeavor by either her mother or another older woman of the household who had the charge of the education of the girls in the family and had the time to teach their girls embroidery.

In all likelihood they were keenly aware of and wanted to emulate the example of accomplished needlewomen at the highest levels of society such as Elizabeth Talbot (aka Bess of Hardwick, the richest woman of her day) and Mary, Queen of Scots. While her parents valued embroidery as a skill to be learned and practiced by their daughters, they were unable or unwilling to put the highest quality materials in the girls’ hands. We can also assume that this book was owned and used either by the girl who embroidered it or a close family member who cherished the accomplishment of the young lady.



Figure 4. Side view of spangle

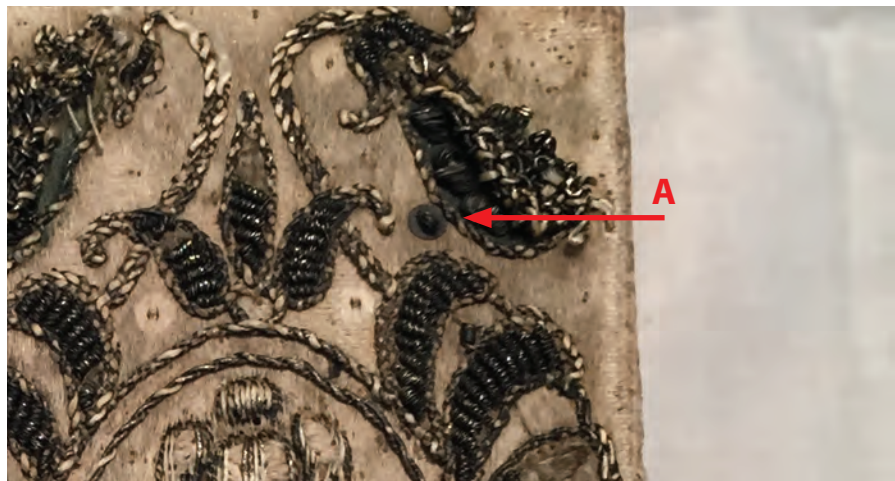


Figure 5. This remaining spangle on the Psalter front cover shows how the spangles were attached.



Figure 6. Detail of Psalter front cover, showing evidence of missing spangle

SIGNS OF WEAR

The embroidery motif on the cover is primarily floral with stylized embellishments: peapods in the upper corners, sweet pea flowers on the bottom corners, and what looks very much like a tulip in the center. While we can see the outline of a tulip, the center motif has taken most of the wear and become indistinct.

One obvious sign of wear is the loss of spangles. Spangles are small, flat metal discs that were hand-pounded and used frequently as embellishments in Elizabethan embroidery. They are very effective at reflecting candlelight and creating a beautifully glinting surface. In this time period, a spangle was typically attached either by making three stitches over the top (almost exclusively in red thread) or by taking a tacking stitch up through the center, threading on a short length of metal bullion, and plunging the needle back down through the same center hole.

One spangle remains on the Psalter cover in the upper right corner at the base of the open peapod (see A in Figures 4 and 5, page 32). This spangle was attached with the single tack stitch and bullion center. This design decision led to the loss of the spangles. The metal bullion stuck up from the spangle and increased the likelihood that it would catch on something and pull off. If each spangle had been sewn on with three stitches, they might have stayed attached far longer.

Of the remaining intact ground fabric, we can see in Figure 6 above, the distinctive circles where the spangles were originally attached along with holes made by the tack stitches (see area B). Dirt outlines the negative space round the area where the spangles had been attached. Their disappearance and the dirty outlines reinforce the conclusion that the book was handled frequently and exposed to heavy wear.

The next area to investigate is the tulip itself. Magnification reveals the understitching in red beneath the silk and metal threads of the intact main petals which have been appliquéd over the understitching (see area C in Figure 7, on page 34). These petals are worked in detached buttonhole with a return.

The design decision led to the loss of the spangles.

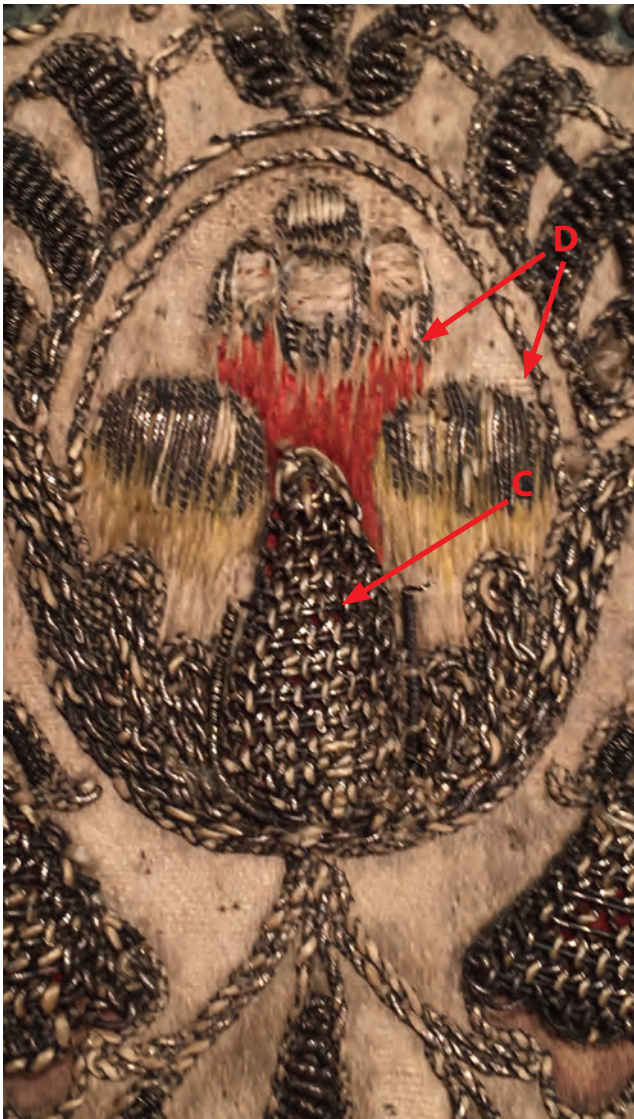


Figure 7. Detail of tulip from back cover of Psalter

Above the intact petals is understitching in red, yellow, and white, exposed only because the silver gilt appliqué that once covered it has lifted off. The red is a continuation of the stitching underneath the intact metal petal. The understitching was not carefully executed: The carries are long, and the colored threads are not well blended. The sloppy work continues into the top of the tulip (see area D in Figure 7 at left). This area was never meant to be exposed. Instead, the coarser thread was to provide dimensionality and a hint of color underneath the lacy metal structure that was appliquéd over it.

An interesting point is that the design on the front and back cover of the Psalter is identical, and the appliquéd metal petal structure is missing in exactly the same place on both sides. Could this identical wear be because this section of embroidery was so much more raised than the rest of the work that it naturally wore off more dramatically, or was this embroidery snipped off and reused elsewhere? This is one part of the story about which we are unable to draw a conclusion.

We can also see red understitching beneath the metal thread covering the sweet pea flower (see area E in Figure 8, page 35). A small lip at the widest part of the flower petal shows a faint pink (see area F in Figure 8, page 35). Was that an intentional color choice, or is the pink a faded version of the vibrant red? Because this sweet pea flower is intact and we do not want to disturb the stitching, we cannot tell. If the metal stitching had worn away or become frayed enough so we could see underneath, we could determine if the red and pink were the same stitching that had simply faded or were two different purposefully chosen colors. We are missing the benefit of wear to help us come to a conclusion.

CONCLUSION

If we could travel back in time (or took the time to recreate this piece), we would see a delicate, lovely little Psalter cover in its pristine state. The white satin would have provided a crisp background to the shiny gold of the metal thread, bullion, and spangles that would have glinted in the daylight or even the mellow light from candles and lanterns at night. The red silk used in the understitching would have peeked through the lacy gold appliqué to provide pops of color. The green silk of the opened sweet pea would have been a lovely compliment to the white satin ground.

When first completed, this rich book cover would have been bright, clean, and shiny—a beautiful and beloved possession that would have invited attention. It would have been a feather in the needleworker's cap, an outward sign of her accomplishment and proof of the status of her family. The book and its embellished needlework cover would be an important symbol of her family's right to proclaim its members as gentry, entitling them to privileged social

Christy Gordon Baty and Erin Harvey Moody will be teaching a four-day course, *Stitching the Trevelyan*, taken from a seventeenth-century folio, at the EGA National Seminar in Alexandria, Virginia, in November 2016. Students will also speak with curators and view the collections at the 1799 Dumbarton House and the Folger Shakespeare Library.

influence and connections. In the early modern period, young women of her station were commodities and being an accomplished needleworker increased her value as an individual as well as enhancing her family's social status.

Unfortunately, time and use are not kind to white fabric, as anyone with children and white furniture can attest. But the wear is not something to be mourned. For needlework historians, the distress has provided clues about the person who made it and the person who loved it.

When researching, look at the best pieces. But never overlook the fragments or the distressed and dirty. They have their own story to tell. ■

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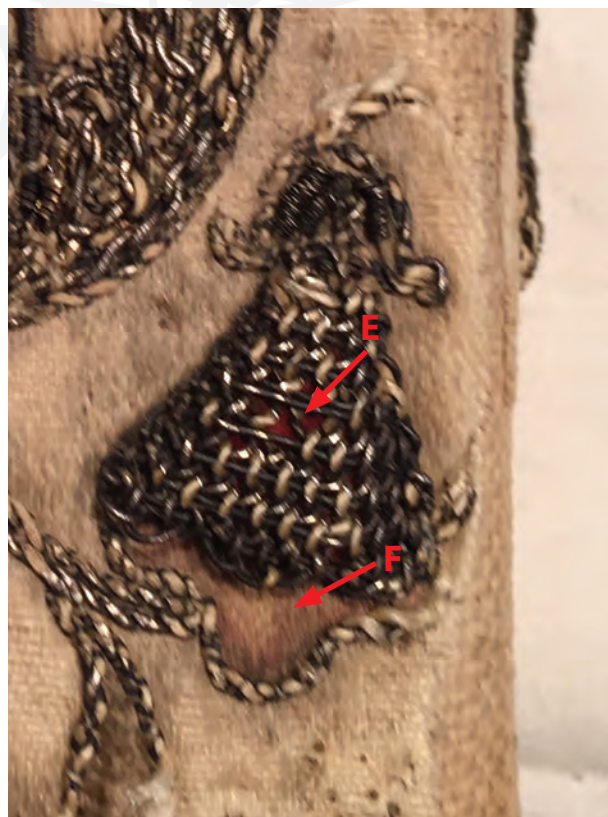


Figure 8. Detail of sweet pea on Psalter back cover

SUMMARY OF EGA 2015 ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting of The Embroiderers' Guild of America was called to order at noon on October 29, 2015, at the Marriott Rivercenter in San Antonio, Texas. President Gwen Nelson presided and Ronald R. Stinson served as Parliamentarian. Delegates representing seventy-four chapters were present and an additional 109 chapters were represented by proxy to the secretary.

President Nelson explained the strategic planning being conducted by the board and the new mission statement that was developed: *The mission of The Embroiderers' Guild of America is to inspire passion for the needle arts through education and the celebration of its heritage.* Further work will be invested to create action plans for each identified goal.

Marie Campbell, chair of the nominating committee, presented the 2015–2018 slate of officers, and President Nelson reported that no written notice of additional

candidates had been received. The slate of officers was elected:

President – Leslie Gagliardi
Vice President – Judy Badger
Secretary – Joyce McCoig
Treasurer – Pam Coller
Director of Bylaws – Rebecca Wardlaw
Director of Education – Barbara Orend
Director of Membership and Marketing – Karen Hamilton

President Nelson installed the new officers. Newly-elected President Leslie Gagliardi thanked the members of EGA. She commented that changes will undoubtedly be needed in the organization as we move forward in our efforts to retain current members and attract new members.

CORRECTION

The measurements for Jette Roy Finlay-Heath's works in the photos on pages 36–41 in the December 2015 issue should have been listed as centimeters, not inches.