



Hannah Skoda and Malcolm Vale

# Medieval and early modern vestments and other textiles at St John's College, Oxford

## Introduction

St John's College is home to an extraordinary collection of medieval and early modern textiles, both liturgical and secular. It is perhaps the most complete collection outside a public art gallery in the United Kingdom. The vestments largely date from the period before the reformation, 1430 to 1530. The college is currently engaged in a project to produce a scholarly catalogue of the collection. In March 2023, a conference on the subject was held, and contributors are currently working on contributions to the publication. Further archival work is identifying the range of ways in which the items came into the college's possession, how they were used, and how they survived the vicissitudes of history.

## Background to the textiles

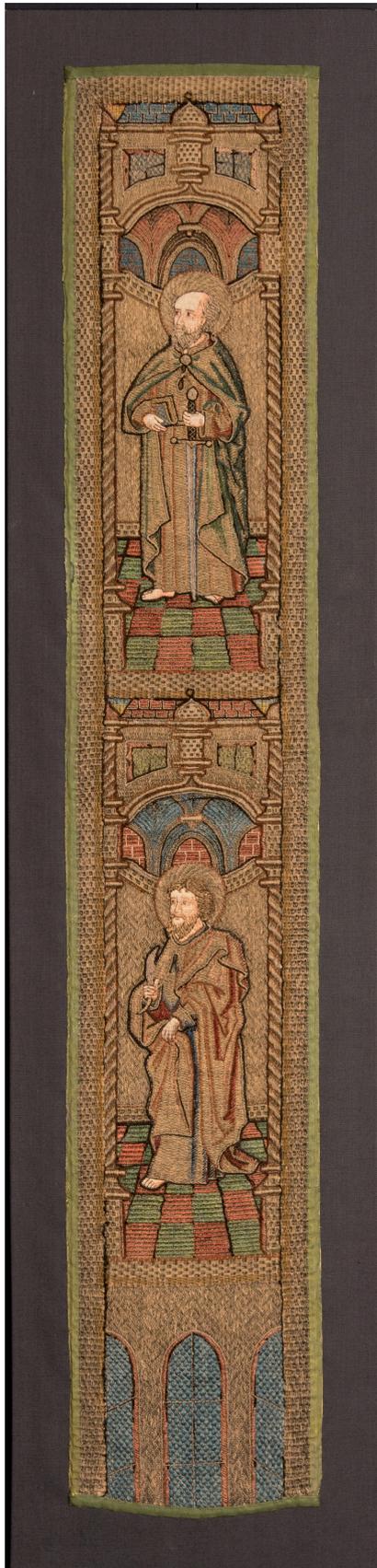
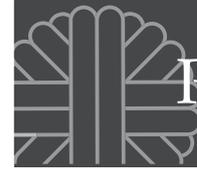
The history of the vestments and other textiles can be pieced together from the college archives. Among the college muniments is an inventory of 14 April 1602, listing a collection of "such old superstitious church ornaments as weare gyven and delyvered unto me Raphe Huchenson, President ... by Mrs Amy Leech, wydowe, our good founder's sister's daughter, to be converted to the benefitt and better use of the sayd Colledge, to which (as is supposed) it sometime did appertayne" (St John's College Archives, MUN XC.23). The founder, Sir Thomas White, was a wealthy London alderman and master of the Merchant Taylors Company who founded St John's in a series of enactments between 1555 and 1557. The college took its name from St John the Baptist, patron saint of the Merchant Taylors. The founder's niece had apparently kept the vestments at the manor house of Fyfield (given by the founder to the college, and leased by his niece)

in the countryside outside Oxford from 1573. Fyfield was to serve as a place of retreat and refuge from plague for the fellows of St John's for many years. It may also have been intended to provide a safe haven from iconoclasm and looting of the vestments, which were unacceptable to puritan, and even moderate Calvinist, beliefs (Hutton 1898, 123; Costin 1958, 70).

The collection appears to have remained largely intact since 1602, despite subsequent attempts at confiscation and the conversion of some items into altar cloths, frontals, pulpit cloths and cushion covers for the college chapel. Some of the items displayed must therefore have formed part of the original equipment



Fig. 1: Cap, metal thread embroidery on linen, mid to late 16th century (Image: Chris Andrews, reproduced by permission of president and fellows of St John's College, Oxford)



of the chapel in 1557, when it was furnished by Sir Thomas White, as founder, with various liturgical accessories. Little is known of its fittings until William Laud's Presidency (1611–1621) in the next century (Costin 1958, 70–71).

### Connections with Archbishop Laud

Laud, who became archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, has traditionally been associated with the vestments. It is commonly believed that some were given to the college by him, including the magnificent blue cope with orphreys and hood of Flemish or Dutch workmanship depicting saints and the coronation of the Virgin Mary (Hutton 1898, 123–125). But the evidence of the 1602 inventory (compiled before Laud became president in 1611) suggests that many of the items pre-dated his time at St John's and were from the founder's time. Their 15th and early 16th century date would confirm this view. The rarest among them is a set of vestments for the pre-reformation high mass (comprising a white satin cope embroidered with flowers and two white satin dalmatics edged with crimson velvet). The earliest piece exhibited (orphreys and hood for a cope) dates from about 1430 to 1460 and, among the most striking pieces, are the two liturgical banners which must date from the college's foundation.

### Aims of the project

The project involves detailed analysis of the collection, including investigation of the precise techniques used and the iconography of each. The project team is also keen to shed light on their wider context. The liturgical context in which the vestments were used is being explored: the vestments have the potential to shed considerable light on the rather specific context of Oxford college chapel worship in a pre-reformation context. Their later histories of hiding and protection, re-use and adaptation are also of interest.

The project team is also interested in the aesthetic qualities of the embroideries. The use of perspective in the orphreys in particular is most striking and reveals a profound grasp of linear perspective and three-dimensionality amongst those designing these pieces. The emotivity of the expressions of the figures depicted in some of the narrative scenes are also striking. These were images which, on some level, generated an affective response, even if few (apart from clergy and acolytes) could see them up close. The

Fig. 2: Detail from orphrey, polychrome silk thread with metal thread, late 15th to early 16th century, Flemish (Image: Chris Andrews, reproduced by permission of president and fellows of St John's College, Oxford)

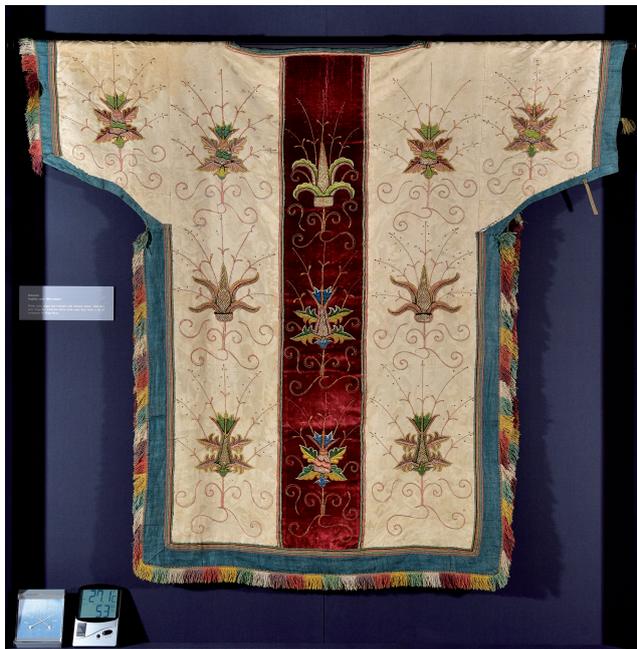


Fig. 3: Dalmatic, ream silk damask with a deep burgundy velvet band, early 16th century, English (Image: Chris Andrews, reproduced by permission of president and fellows of St John's College, Oxford)

project will situate the aesthetic skills of embroiderers among the greatest works of the northern renaissance. Scholarship on the art of the renaissance focuses on the emotivity, naturalism, and use of perspective in painting and sculpture, but textiles are rarely considered as part of this movement (Nash 2008).

The project is also interested in the wider commercial context in which *opus anglicanum* in particular was appreciated and traded. The collection will be compared with pieces from the Catharijne Convent Museum in Utrecht, in order to get a sense of the wider sharing of techniques, movement and commerce of the works themselves (Leefflang and Schooten, 2015).

The project will also involve the opportunity to hear from those involved in the reconstruction of medieval textiles, particularly from those involved in the *Holy Hands* project, and Jane Malcolm-Davies' work on reconstruction. It is hoped that this will yield even more insights into the ways in which these textiles worked in reality.

The liturgical textiles which lie at the heart of the collection will also be analysed alongside other objects in two ways. One axis concerns other textiles in the college's collections. There is a number of later tapestries, which shed light on the wider role of textiles in college life (Marillier 1926). The college also has a

raised work cushion from the workshop of Edmund Harrison, the king's embroiderer, which, unusually, depicts a new testament scene. There are several other chapel furnishings, which provide a wider sense of the context in which the vestments were used. Notably, a triptych attributed to Goossen van der Weyden in Southampton City Art Gallery shows *Saint Catherine and the Philosophers*: infrared reflectography and x-radiography revealed overpainted coats of arms on the reverse of the altarpiece wings of the triptych. These coats of arms are definitively associated with St John's College, showing the triptych to have been probably part of the original chapel furnishings on the foundation of the college (Billinge and Campbell, 2003).

### Publication

The conference proceedings will include research by Richard de Beer (University of Utrecht), Tanya Bentham (independent scholar), Mary Brooks (University of Durham), Matthew Cheung-Salisbury (University of Oxford), James Clarke (University of Exeter), Kate Heard (Royal Collection Trust), Jane Malcolm-Davies (University of Copenhagen), Rebecca Moisan (Southampton Art Gallery), Lesley O'Connell Edwards (independent scholar), Michael Riordan (University of Oxford), Jane Stevenson (University of Oxford), Malcolm Vale (University of Oxford), Ingela Wahlberg (University of Uppsala), Katherine Wilson (University of Chester) and Helen Wyld (National Galleries, Scotland).

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Corresponding author:  
hannah.skoda@history.ox.ac.uk