

## **'MILLAIS' EMBROIDERY – ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH ALTAR FRONTAL**

This glorious embroidery depicts stylized acanthus leaves and blooms 'exploding' from a central urn of silver-coloured metal thread, in a blaze of autumn colours. A loose pelmet of yellow and cream silk damask is attached along the top edge.

It is believed that it was donated to the church in the 1920's by the grandson of the well-known artist, John Everett Millais.

In early 2020, The Textile Conservancy approached by the Treasurer of St. Matthew's Church, Mr. Richard Henderson JP, with a view to repairing regions of detached laid metal thread. But, as it transpired, the condition and problems in the method of construction, lead to an extensive treatment being carried out. This is a brief account of the conservation process.

Conservation is generally divided into a logical sequence of procedures: examination and documentation, cleaning and repair. This project was no exception. In examination, it was found that the plain linen top sections were heavily stained and the linen backing to the embroidery was too tight. Both factors provided justification for separating the elements, leaving the embroidery without support, which enabled it to be realigned. Distortions were eased and a truer format achieved – a growth of approximately 20mm on both sides.

The embroidery was surface cleaned with low-powered vacuum suction to lift loose particulate soiling and silk dust. The plain weave linen top section was wet-cleaned to ease the stains and marks on the pale fabric.

A new interlining was added to the reverse to support conservation stitching.

Attached to a tapestry frame with the aid of two long metal rollers, the embroidered metal threads were re-aligned and secured using a fine mono-filament thread.

A fine conservation-grade net was dyed to a deep apricot tone that when placed over the embroidery, introduced the suggestion of the original pale silk that was used as a background to the embroidery. (The majority has long deteriorated into silk dust but behind some of the randomly placed patches, fractured fragments were found).

The overlay was added to protect the embroidery thread, which in localised areas throughout the textile, was either missing or worn. The conservation net would also guard the metal thread work which is vulnerable as the laid thread that holds it in position, is deteriorating.

The net was aligned and pinned under slight tension to ensure it was flat to the embroidery. A grid of support lines was mapped across the surface, following the curves and turns of the design. The flexibility of the weave enabled it to be worked over the three-dimensional urn without creating distortions. The edges were turned and secured on the reverse.

The altar frontal was re-assembled with a new lining that also served to replace the strip of linen that had been attached above the damask pelmet along the top. The linen altar top cover was re-joined with the embroidery with hand-stitched seams.

Finally, the narrow gold coloured cord that had been stitched along the bottom was replaced with an olive-green velvet ribbon to protect the net on the edge.

The altar frontal proved a rewarding and enjoyable challenge for the conservator and technician who worked on the project. Now returned to St. Matthew's Church, it is safely stored until the Christmas services when it will be displayed for all to admire.

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The Textile Conservancy Company Limited