

29-64 : Canvas work panel depicting Esther and Ahasuerus, 1652



Canvas work panel depicting the Biblical story of Esther and Ahasuerus (Esther 3-8) in linen embroidered in silk threads worked in tent stitch. The scenes depicted are in the centre, Ahasuerus touching Esther with his golden sceptre, thereby granting her the right of self-defence for the Jews; on the left, Esther's banquet attended by Ahasuerus and Haman, his vizier, whom she denounces for his persecution of the Jews; at top centre, Mordecai, Esther's cousin, dressed in the king's finest clothes on horseback preceded by a herald; and top right, a sleepless Ahasuerus being read Mordecai's role in foiling a plot against him with to the right Haman hung on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Made by I H, England, 1652 -the initials are on the table cloth in the banquet scene and the date is on the castle.

Esther seems to be a popular choice of subject for seventeenth century needlework panels - there are several versions in the Burrell Collection. This panel is very similar to one in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, dated 1654, which bears the arms of the Dyers' Company (WA 1947.191.309).

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew for name of Xerxes and is traditionally thought to be Xerxes I (reigned 485 - 465 BC), who defeated the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae and Greeks at Artemisium, before being beaten at Salamis. Esther was Ahasuerus' second wife, a daughter of Abigail, of the tribe of Benjamin. She is often seen as a figure of heroism and bravery - unsuccessful petitioners to the king were often sentenced to death. Traditionally she was associated with the Jewish cause, but during the seventeenth century she was also adopted by other persecuted groups, such as Royalists during the Commonwealth, Puritans under James VII of Scotland and II of England, and Jacobites under William and Mary.

Animals, birds and flowers fill the spaces between the scenes. These traditionally have symbolic meanings. The sun emerging behind the cloud can represent the revealing of truth after a period of lies or uncertainty. The caterpillar is a symbol for Charles I, and the butterfly for Charles II and his restoration. Oaks and acorns have often been associated with monarchy, but here there is the specific association with Boscobel oak. Meanwhile, the mermaid holding a mirror and comb is a well-known symbol of vanity. However, whether specific symbols were chosen for their didactic or aesthetic appeal by the sewer, her supervisor, or the draughtsperson is unknown.