

A Late Elizabethan "Sweetbag" or Purse 29.310



NEW ACQUISITION PRESS RELEASE

The Trustees of the Burrell Collection have purchased a late Elizabethan "sweetbag" or purse. It is a small embroidered, tasselled purse with a drawstring worked in the style of the richest Elizabethan embroidery. The linen ground is completely covered in brick stitch in silver thread with the floral motifs in detached buttonhole stitch rising out between scrolling lines of plaited braid stitch in silver gilt.

Its condition is exquisite. None of the original attachments, such as the tassels and drawstring, are missing and the lining is intact. The unfaded nature of the dyed silks is unusual and provides a rare glimpse of the true colour schemes favoured by the Elizabethans and early Jacobean.

Although called a "sweet bag", it is unlikely that this purse was ever used to hold sweets. They appear with frequency on inventories or in household accounts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and in the lists of New Year gifts to the monarch. Their probable use was as "decorative envelopes" for presents of money or jewellery. Bishops and the higher aristocracy were obliged to give the monarch presents of gold coins in ornamental bags at the New Year. The method of making these presents is described by Henry, fifth Earl of Huntingdon. He gave £20 in gold to James I and VI on New Year's Day in 1604-5. He received eighteen ounces of gilt plate in return.

"The manner of presenting a New Year's gift to his Majesty from the Earl of Huntingdon. You must buy a new purse of about Vs. price, and put there into XX pieces of new gold of XXs. apiece, and go to the Presence-chamber, where the Court is, upon New Year's day, in the morning about 8 o'clock, and deliver the purse and the gold unto my Lord Chamberlain....."

The bags were almost certainly made by professional embroiderers and bought for such ceremonies. The style and quality of the embroidery, especially the silver and silver gilt thread work, would confirm this.

The new purchase fills a gap in The Burrell Collection. Although there are pieces of Elizabethan work in the Collection, a selection of which are on display in the Embroidery Gallery, this type of object and style of embroidery was poorly represented. The new purchase is to be displayed alongside an existing purse in the Collection of a later date and differing style.

Ann French January 30th 1991

Another Sweetbag in the collection: 29.153

