

**The Portrait of Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of Southampton,
'The Kimberley Throne'
and
'The Chaloner Carpet'**



The portrait of Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of Southampton (1572-1655) [Reg.no. 35-672] was painted in England by a follower of the artist Marcus Gheeraerts (1562-1636) around 1622 - so she was around 50 years old at the time. She was a celebrated beauty in the court of Queen Elizabeth in her youth, and secretly married William Shakespeare's famous patron, Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, in 1598. Although she is wearing black, she was not a widow in 1622 - the colour is a 'fashion statement' (though her dress was already rather old-fashioned at the date of the painting!). The painting was purchased for the collection by the Burrell Trustees in 1999, with the aid of a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The painting shows the Countess in a theatrical pose, standing on an oriental carpet, behind swagged embroidered silk curtains and with her hand prominently placed on a plumply-cushioned silk velvet-upholstered chair. Everything in the painting indicates the luxurious 'high status' position of the sitter. The carpet would have been imported from Asia at very great expense. Only the very rich would stand on carpets like this, and then only rarely - most carpets were used as table coverings (as several contemporary paintings show). The chair is particularly rich in appearance and very prominent. Most furniture of the time was made of oak (see the table, chairs and chest in the room), and most people always sat on low benches. Only those of higher social status would use chairs, and to use a chair with such rich upholstery as this was a sign of very high status indeed. (This brings to mind the fairy story of *The Princess and the Pea*, where the delicate Princess was unable to sleep in a bed in which was a tiny pea buried beneath piles of thick mattresses). The embroidery on the velvet and the fringe probably incorporated real gold thread. This portrait has explicit links to both 'The Kimberley Throne' and 'The Chaloner Carpet' which are displayed in the centre of the room.



'The Kimberley Throne' [Reg. no. 14-217] was made up from embroidered silk velvet hangings. It came from Kimberley Hall in Norfolk, and was purchased by Sir William Burrell from the dealers Acton Surgey in 1947. Thrones (also known as 'Chairs of Estate' or 'Cloths of Estate') are seats incorporating canopies, backcloths and sometimes footstools, which are intended only for sitters of the very highest social status - which effectively rules out anyone who is not of royal blood (see information on chair in Countess of Southampton's portrait, above). Thrones are often also placed on platforms, to raise them, literally, above 'ordinary' level. This throne is thought to have been constructed specially for Queen Elizabeth's use when she stayed in Kimberley Hall on the night of 22 August 1578. The stay at the Hall was part of a 'Royal Progress' in this area of England. She and her Court were on their way from Norwich to Cambridge (there is a journal recording the journey). Each family who hosted the Court en route would have had to pay the expenses incurred - sometimes having to feed and entertain dozens of people and their entourages. They would try to outdo each other in the splendour and variety of what they provided. Elizabeth's links with Kimberley went back to the time when her mother, Anne Boleyn, stayed there with King Henry VIII (an embroidered velvet bed valance incorporating the monogram of Henry and Anne, from Kimberley, is also in The Burrell Collection, but because of its fragility can only rarely be displayed). The embroidered heraldic arms on the backcloth of the throne are those of the Wodehouse and Corbet families (the co-joined families of the owners of the Hall). The two 'wildmen' supporters of the shield of arms are a punning reference to the word 'wode/wood' in the name of the owner ('wild man of the woods'), and these two men carrying clubs also recall, in the fashion of a parody, the classical hero Hercules, who is also usually depicted carrying a club in art. It is probable that this 'throne' was made up from hangings which already existed in the Hall, and perhaps originally formed part of an elaborate tester bed. The rich embroidery was professionally worked, and possibly carried out in Italy. '



'The Chaloner Carpet' [Reg. no. 9-138] was one of the first carpets made in England using the 'knotting' technique. It measures 562cm by 224cm (18ft 6in by 7ft 4in). The technique of knotting individual woollen threads into a woven fabric (in this case hemp), was developed in Asia (as in the imported carpet in the portrait of Elizabeth Vernon), but was also developed on the Continent from the 12th century. Previously most carpets in England and Scotland had been embroidered, or tapestry-woven like Burrell's 'Luttrell Table Carpet' (not currently on display). It is thought that professional foreign carpet makers, perhaps from Flanders (present-day Belgium), made this carpet around 1600 for Sir Thomas Chaloner (1561-1615) of Steeple Claydon, Buckinghamshire and Guisborough, Yorkshire. Chaloner was favoured at the Courts of both Queen Elizabeth and James VI and I. He was appointed tutor to Henry, Prince of Wales in 1603 and also became manager of the estate of King James's wife, Anne of Denmark (see the red silk embroidered skirt panel on display in the Embroidery Room, which appears similar to the curtains in the portrait of Elizabeth Vernon, and which is traditionally supposed to have belonged to Anne of Denmark). The carpet was saved from export and purchased for the collection by the Burrell Trustees in 2000, with the aid of grants from The Art Fund and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The pattern on the centre of the carpet repeats six times. It consists of intertwined stems of a plant from the cucumber family, incorporating leaves, flowers and fruits (gourds?). At this time, botanical drawings and prints were available, and may have been used as a graphic source for this design. Within the stems can be found birds, butterflies, caterpillars, dragonflies, snails and snakes (it's fun to look for these). The border, a classical round-arched arcade supporting grape-bearing vines, 'controls' the chaos of the central panel. We know that Sir Thomas Chaloner was interested in the Natural World, so this was a very appropriate design for him.

[You could possibly also mention 'The Lochleven Hangings' as a Scottish example of professional embroidery of the period, made late 16th or early 17th century and associated with the House of Lochleven, built around 1545 by the Earls of Morton.]