

Litany of Loreto Embroideries

The origins of this set of embroideries are shrouded in mystery – but there is absolutely no doubt about the fineness of the needlework...

Each panel:
Embroidery dimensions: 315 x 475 mm
Framed dimensions: 480 x 665 mm

Right: Panel 4: *Mater Intemerata* – *Mother Undeiled*: The Virgin, holding the Christ child in her arms, is depicted amongst the waves whilst a demon-like figure grasps at her robes. The sea is worked in black and white, the foam in small white seed stitches and the crests in fine curved stem stitches. In contrast, the Virgin's cloak has gently curved lines with light shadows in pale cross-hatched straight stitches. The rays of her halo are couched in Japanese gold thread. The demon is worked in black straight stitches; its head is covered with snakes worked in grey and cream stem and straight stitches.

The exquisite panels known as the 'Litany of Loreto Embroideries' caused quite a stir when they were exhibited at the Knitting and Stitching Shows last year. The fineness of the work has to be seen to be believed; the shading, detail and artistry are all executed in stitch, achieving a standard of craftsmanship that many strive for, but few achieve. At least one person who viewed them was reduced to tears by the sheer beauty of the panels.

Part of the Royal School of Needlework Collection, there are twelve panels in the set, each representing an invocation of the Virgin Mary as described in the Litany of Loreto. The Litany of the



Blessed Virgin Mary developed over the centuries; this version, officially recognised by the Vatican, was recited at the Sacred House of Loreto, a shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary, every Saturday. It has since been used throughout

the Roman Catholic world.

The panels are said to have been a gift to an elderly nun. Kept in her London convent, they were never displayed, and during the war they were removed for safekeeping to the Convent of the Holy Child

in Mayfield, East Sussex.

The origin of the panels is shrouded in mystery. Whether they were the work of one person or a group, and where they were stitched, is unknown. It is thought that they may have been intended

Below: Panel 6: *Virgo Clemens – Virgin Most Merciful:*

A woodland setting with a workman kneeling, almost prostrate, before the Virgin Mary. Her cloak is held out, offering him shelter. The trees are worked with curved broken stem-stitch lines. Couched rays of Japanese gold

thread radiate from the Virgin's halo. Her white veil is worked in curved lines of stem stitch.



Below: Panel 8: *Speculum Justitiæ – Mirror of Justice:*

The Virgin sits on a throne, holding a pair of balanced scales. Two figures clothed in black are on the steps of the throne. The black robes are worked in long and short stitch, the stem-stitched veils highlighted in white. The Virgin's

pale wimple is set off against the throne, and dark straight stitches are worked over circular motifs in gold Japanese thread. A background of palm and pine trees is stitched in tones of brown and beige.



for use in a Lady Chapel, but this is pure speculation. Delighted to have the embroideries in their Collection, the Royal School of Needlework admit that they do not know how this unusual bequest came into their possession.

The design of the panels is clearly influenced by the late 19th-century pre-Raphaelite art movement, which accounts for the medieval references and the romantic images so typical of paintings from that era. In various ways the designs also echo the style found in many stained-glass

windows.

The fact that the panels were never put on display perhaps accounts for their freshness. Stitched on a rich, cream satin background in shades of beige, fawn, brown and white silks enriched with gold threads, there is a subtle, sepia glow to the embroideries. Worked mostly in long and short stitch with some of the outlines couched in thicker thread, the fine stitching captures the flowing lines of the figures and costumes. On closer inspection, even with the evidence of your own eyes, it

is difficult to comprehend that the superb detail of the eyes, hair and delicately shaded areas is all achieved with stitch – but it is.

Religious sources and references have always provided a rich supply of images for embroidery. A celebration of religious beliefs, this unique set of panels is also a lasting testament to the skills of the embroiderer.

A booklet featuring all twelve panels has been produced by the Royal School of Needlework. It costs £7 per copy, including postage.

A pack of 10 Christmas cards featuring one of the designs is also available. Each card is A5 size. The cards cost £7.99 per pack (including p&p). Contact: Royal School of Needlework, Apartment 12A, Hampton Court Palace, Surrey KT8 9AU. Tel: 020 8943 1432. Email: enquiries@royal-needlework.co.uk