

Apparell'd in celestial light

Next month, an unrivalled collection of church vestments will be exhibited in London. Huon Mallalieu considers the historic context of these rare and exquisite textiles

IN his *Tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain* (1724–27), Daniel Defoe tells us that, on his 'going to see the church at Durham, they showed us the old popish vestments of the clergy before the Reformation and which in high days some of the residents put on still. They are so rich with embroidery and embossed work of silver, that indeed it was a kind of load to stand under them'.

A few years earlier, in the same place, Celia Fiennes had seen the same vestments and noted one cope that 'above the rest was so richly embroider'd with the whole description of Christ's nativity Life, Death and ascension... here is the only place that they use these things in England and severall more Ceremonyes and Rites retained from the tymes of popery'.

‘Medieval vestments were an expression of the over-arching power of the Church’



Detail from El Greco's *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (1586–88) in San Tomé, Toledo, with saints wearing 16th-century vestments

these clerical robes as spiritual equivalents of helmets, breastplates and gorgets.

A priest—and, above all, a bishop—was elevated above his flock not only by his office, but also by the splendour of his uniform and the symbols and pictorial decorations on it emphasised his role as the conduit between God and Man, just as the state robes of a king announced his God-given power over his subjects.

The message was as clear to the illiterate as to the lettered. From the Middle Ages,

textiles played a major part in the theatre of power, a part that was emphasised by the value of the materials, the gold and silver thread, silks and the highest-quality wools augmented by jewels, speaking to the world in an elaborate visual language. From the ornamented staging of ecclesiastical rituals and dress, especially in the celebrations of feast days, to ordered aristocratic rites of passage, such as birth, marriage, coronation and death, even execution, textiles functioned to communicate.

Rulers across the European, Byzantine and Islamic worlds expressed their dynastic claims, military prowess, political aspirations and accomplishments by commissioning, displaying, wearing and making gifts of textiles.

It is not surprising that the Counter-Reformation Church should continue to use such a powerful medium of *propaganda*—a new-coined Latin word, then meaning 'propagation', as it does in the missionary

Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, founded in the 1620s—and to put even greater emphasis on the aesthetic and theatrical elements of its services.

Painting and music were as tightly controlled as liturgy and vestments after the Council of Trent, so that all should proclaim the power and glory of God and his Church. The contrast with Puritan practices was a valuable weapon, although less austere Protestants might also use it; in the

German-speaking north, the Lutherans encouraged music and some continued to use the old vestments.

The Reformation and Counter-Reformation not only brought generations of war to Europe, but coincided with the first great wave of European colonial acquisition, for the most part by Catholic powers. Many of the same spectacular propaganda tools were used by the Church in the mission to convert the heathen overseas as the heretic at home. ➤

Vestments in the newly converted lands were as powerful as before, but, naturally, cultural influences flowed both ways. The Spanish brought European patterns and traditions to the Americas and the Portuguese to India and China, but they blended with indigenous cultures to produce new and beautiful variations on old themes.

For 27 years in Connaught Street, London W2, Indar Pasricha Fine Arts has been known primarily for old and contemporary Indian paintings—many by European artists—Indian miniatures, silver, works of art and small furniture, but it has also always had a strong interest in textiles. For the opening show in his new Pimlico premises, Mr Pasricha will bring the textiles to the fore and the 16th- to 19th-century Roman Catholic vestments that are its main focus will be a revelation to many.

Considerable scholarly interest has already been sparked in Spain, France and Austria, as well as at the V&A, where a lecture is planned. Here, there will be no *opus Anglicanum*, but the exhibition can be seen as a pendant to the V&A show, illuminating the later history of vestments made overseas.



Embroidery on a chasuble made in Lyon or Italy in about 1740. The silvery *trompe-l'oeil* treatment of the palm ribs is a detail not seen before by leading expert Xavier Peticol

Presiding over it, like that great cope at Durham Cathedral, will be a complete 16th-century Spanish set of pontifical vestments—cope, chasuble, two dalmatics, screed, stole, handle and two dalmatic collets—probably made for the Church of San Lorenzo in Philip II of Spain's palace of El Escorial. The morse, by which a cope is fastened across the wearer's chest, is embroidered with Philip's royal arms and the chain of the Golden Fleece. The orphrey, or decorated band applied to a cope or chasuble, derives its images from designs by artists such as Raphael and Dürer.

‘The exhibition highlights a “golden moment” in European textile production’

In this sense, ‘pontifical’ refers to vestments used in a High Mass celebrated by a bishop in full pomp. He would have fully understood Defoe's comment, as the ‘kind of load’ under which he stood comes to more than seven stone.

Despite some inevitable fading after nearly five centuries, and even without the flickering play of church candles on the gold wire, the heavy red-and-gold brocade, or ‘brocaille’, is still a formidable creation. An idea

of how it would have impressed Philip and his fellow congregants can best be gathered from contemporary paintings, such as the central group in El Greco's 1586–88 *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* in San Tomé, Toledo. At the funeral of the philanthropic 14th-century count, SS Stephen and Augustine were believed to have manifested themselves to lay him in the grave. They are shown in pontificals of just such weaving.

A stole of similar weaving is shown in the Prado's 1655 *St Benedict Blessing the Bread* by Fray Juan Andrés Rizi.

It was not only reformation or revolution that might cause these things to leave the churches for which they were made. In 1403, for instance, the Dean of the Royal Chapel at Westminster ordered an inventory of ‘divers surplus ornaments delivered by the King's command from the vestry to various persons’. Queen Isabella, widow of Richard II, had received ‘an entire Vestment’—that is to say, a full set of garments together with chapel furnishings. By the early 20th century, Philip II's pontifical had reached the collection of the Modernist architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner as a result of a similar dispersal.

The exhibition highlights a ‘golden moment’ in European textile production from 1690 to 1720. By the late 17th century, there was less need to retell biblical stories through pictures for the illiterate and vestment designs became more generalised, making their effect through beauty rather than preaching.

This allowed designers and weavers to adapt secular fashions to ecclesiastical use.

One such fashion, chiefly seen in Court and aristocratic clothing, is known as ‘Bizarre’ because of its asymmetrical designs in which silks were brocaded against a one-colour background, allowing for layers of pattern, colour and texture. This may have taken inspiration from India, but was produced in Venice, Lyon and Spitalfields until about 1720, when the craze passed.

‘The fabric of the orphrey is even richer: gold cloth, gold thread, frizzy gold’

Generalised design persisted, however, and a particularly fine example is a chasuble dating from the 1740s, another highlight of the show. The quality and complexity of this is best conveyed in the technical description by Xavier Peticol, the French authority on historic textiles, who has examined it for the gallery: ‘This superb chasuble consists of two fabrics certainly from the same workshop, woven in either Lyon or Northern Italy.

‘Background fabric: silver cloth, silver thread, frizzy silver, polychrome silks, twill weave, extra weft and brocaded design of two paths following each other (*à deux Chemins suivis*), called reversible, meaning it reads the same when turned upside down; with undulating palm branches on which a crumpled ribbon with emerging naturalistic flowering branches unfurls. Thanks to the “reversible” design, the background

fabric of the two sides of the chasuble is perfectly symmetrical.

‘The fabric of the orphrey is even richer: brocaded gold cloth, gold thread, frizzy gold, gold strips, silver thread, frizzy silver, silver strips, polychrome silks... A sinuous silver palm resting on a gold ground, with foliage and imaginary flowers partially of natural colours which match the ribbon and the flowers on the background cloth.

‘The special characteristic of this fabric which has been never seen before on the ribs of the palm is a *trompe-l'oeil* of graduated diamond barrettes made with silver strips.’

Orphreys decorated with skulls and crossbones may indicate influences returning across the Atlantic, such as the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead, but also reflect characteristics of Spanish culture. In 1604, for instance, Cristóbal de Valenzuela, a master craftsman in Corboba, was commissioned to provide two altar frontals, one of which was to be ‘of black velvet, with borders and *caidas* (falls) in yellow and white satin, with skulls and crossbones embroidered in gold’. The exhibition includes a pair of similar orphreys in crimson velvet, skulls and crossbones painted on silk taffeta, with silk-and-gold polychrome embroidered borders, originally intended to be worn on a black-velvet vestment.

Among the later exhibits are several mid- to late-19th-century Chinese liturgical



The embroidered hood of the Philip II cope, depicting the Crucifixion

items, including vestments made for the Bishop of Macau and a marten, or *jijin*, which was a Chinese form of headgear adapted by missionaries to take the place of a *biretta*.

The vestments and other textiles in this exhibition, which have been gathered over the past 20 years from collections in France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Germany, the USA and Britain, are all for sale, providing a rare opportunity for collectors. Prices range from £2,000 upwards.

‘Apparell'd in Celestial Light’ is at Indar Pasricha Fine Arts, 44, Moreton Street, London SW1, from September 26 to November 3, Tuesday to Saturday (020-7724 9541; www.indarparicha.co.uk)

The cope made for Philip II's palace chapel. The Passion scenes are taken from prints by an Old Master whose identity has yet to be determined



The sumptuous chasuble would have been intended to be worn for the great festivals of the liturgical calendar