

Three Scottish embroideries

by Helen Bennett

Since 1973 the Museum has purchased three major examples of 16th- and 17th-century embroidery which help to bridge the gap between the exceptional early 16th-century ecclesiastical piece, the Fetternear Banner (McRoberts 1956), and the more familiar samplers and furnishings of the 18th and 19th centuries. All three were intended as hangings and, considering the extent to which needlework was used to ornament the home as well as the person, it is perhaps surprising that these should be the first household embroideries of this period in the collection.¹

In February 1973 the earliest, a set of three valances joined as a panel, was acquired from the executors of Lord Glentanar (pl 25). The needlework was described and discussed in an earlier volume of the *Proceedings* by R Scott-Moncrieff (1918) and, having previously been in the possession of the Earls of Morton at Dalmahoy House, is now referred to as the Morton valances.

The three valances are in tent stitch, carried out in wool with silk highlights, and show elegant figures dressed in elaborate late 16th-century costume against a background of formal gardens. The valances have been sewn one above another and, to complete the rectangle, additional pieces, less well drawn and possibly not of the same set, have been patched into the top left and bottom right corners; the panel is finished with a scrolled floral border in a more naïve style. Comparison with the back shows that the face of the work, now predominantly blue, has lost much of its brilliance through fading and deterioration of the yarn: most of the background of the border, which was probably bright yellow, has disappeared and there are a number of bare patches, particularly the ruffs, which retain only fragmentary traces of the bleached silk with which they were sewn. This damage does, however, demonstrate that the details of the design were carefully marked onto the canvas before the work commenced.

The Morton set is one of a group of valances surviving from the 16th century which are notable for the confident drawing and execution of their courtly scenes; the subjects are sometimes difficult to identify but are usually biblical or mythological themes drawn from contemporary printed sources (Digby 1963, 134-5; Swain 1970, 23-30). A good number of these pieces have Scottish connections and have become associated with Mary, Queen of Scots, and there is a tradition that the Morton valances were worked by the 'Queen's Maries' while imprisoned at Lochleven (Scott-Moncrieff 1918, 77). That they may have originally come from Lochleven is possible, the castle then being in the possession of the Douglas family, but the remainder of the tradition seems most unlikely. It has recently been shown (Swain 1973, 42-3, 56-60) that during the period of her captivity insufficient materials were allowed Mary and her ladies to complete even one such valance let alone the number attributed to this period, and in any case it seems that only Mary Seton was with the Queen at the time. The style of the costume is now considered to be more typical of French fashions of the 1580s, and the close similarity of the members of this group of needlework together with the competence of their execution has led to the suggestion that they are the products of professional embroiderers, possibly French in origin, working in Scotland after Mary's departure (Swain 1973, 50-1).

A second panel, from the W S Bell of Aberdeen collection, was purchased from Sotheby's in April 1975 (pl 26). The piece was brought to our notice by Miss Santina Levey of the Victoria and Albert Museum, who discovered a photograph of it in the Museum records with a note that it had formerly been in the possession of Lady Gordon of Park, Banffshire.² It consists of four strips of fine canvas, of linen or hemp,³ sewn together widthways, each with a design of tendrils bearing fruit, exotic flowers and foliage trained round a pole or trunk issuing from a hillock with

an animal at the base – three have rabbits, the fourth a lion. The design is worked in cross-stitch over two threads in each direction, again in polychrome wools with some silk; only the strip with the lion has part of the background worked (compare with the border applied to the Morton valances). Some of the yarn has deteriorated, but most of the colours are in a fine state of preservation, so much so that the most brilliant were suspected of being the products of aniline dyes – an idea that has since been disproved by analysis.³

Again, it seems more likely that the embroidery was not designed for a panel but the motifs were intended for application to other fabrics, perhaps as borders to bed curtains.⁴ The style is closely comparable with a number of slips, in varying stages of completion but not cut out, preserved at Traquair House. One group takes a similar form of narrow panels of fruit and foliage closely twined round pillars or poles, another, more spaciouly treated, of inhabited trees each with a beast and mound at the base (Swain 1970, pl 8). Slips in similar style in the Victoria and Albert Museum have been attributed to the early years of the 17th century (Nevinson 1938, 30).

The third piece was also acquired in 1975, at the sale at Cullen House, Banffshire (pl 27). Worked in wool in a variety of filling stitches, including French knots, the pattern consists of meandering branches, bearing exotic flowers and foliage, emerging from a chinoiserie base of hillocks inhabited with a variety of figures and animals including sheep and a shepherd playing pipes. Whereas embroidery of this type was usually worked on cotton/linen twill, this has a background of cotton satin, but close inspection has revealed that the motifs have been cut out and applied to a new backing, the join most skilfully disguised with a new line of embroidery around the edge of each; this also accounts for the slightly crowded appearance of the design. In addition, strips of green plush have been applied to the edges to convert the work to a bed cover.⁵ The appearance of both the cotton satin and the plush suggests that this conversion was made comparatively recently, possibly around the turn of the century, and the embroidery is likely originally to have been part of a hanging.

The fashion for hangings of twill worked with polychrome wools, known as crewel work, belongs to the 17th and 18th centuries and seems to have become established in Scotland by the middle of the 17th century (Swain 1970, 32–4). The style of these hangings has for some time been accepted as having been influenced by the printed Indian cottons imported by the East India Companies from the early 1600s on; further, Irwin and Brett have argued (1970, 3–6) that cottons were printed with indianised versions of English needlework designs to suit European taste and exported from India in large quantities. One example illustrated by them (1970, 67–8, pl 5, colour pl 1), which they regard as having been made in Western India but the pattern probably derived from a printed source for needlework from England, corresponds closely with the hillocks and figures of the Cullen piece. The shepherd with pipes motif appears in other 17th-century embroideries,⁶ and although the printed source for this has yet to be identified the Cullen embroidery is tentatively placed in the late 17th century.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am indebted to Mrs M H Swain for examining and discussing the pieces with me; this note has been compiled in the light of her comments.

NOTES

- 1 Although not domestic pieces there are other examples of large-scale work of this time in the collection: two 17th-century embroidered royal coats of arms (Henshall and Maxwell 1962).

- 2 The original note recorded the place as 'Tark' but this is assumed to be a slip of the pen for Park. The date of the photograph is unknown but the last Lady Gordon of Park was Joanna (died 1872), wife of Sir John Gordon of Park. Their eldest son took the name Gordon-Duff which remains the family name.
- 3 Analysis of the fibres and dyes was kindly undertaken by Dr David Duff of Paisley College of Technology. The fibre of the ground was tentatively identified (by the Twist Test) as hemp rather than linen, and the thread joining the panels as cotton. The dyes of the yarns, both silk and wool, proved to be natural substances, all but one of the blues and greens giving a positive result for indigo and two of the reds for cochineal; the exact dyestuffs used for the yellows proved elusive.
- 4 A velvet panel, thought to be part of a bed curtain, from Scone Palace is scattered with applied floral motifs in tent stitch (Digby 1963, 120, 122, pl 63).
- 5 The coverlet is shown in use in the Ogilvy bedroom at Cullen House by Patullo (1967, 120).
- 6 Information from Mrs M H Swain.

REFERENCES

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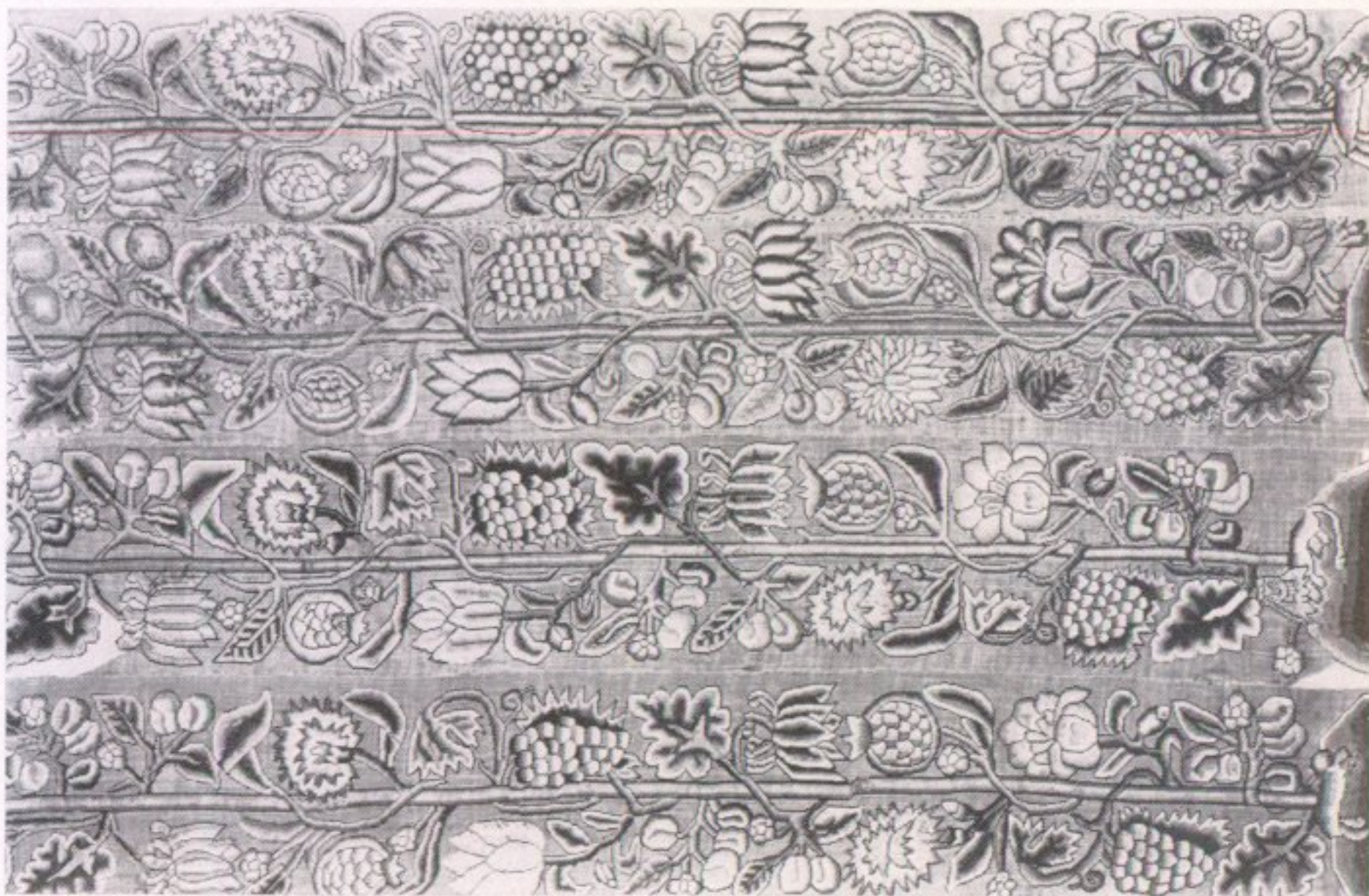
a The Morton valances



b Detail of the centre valance



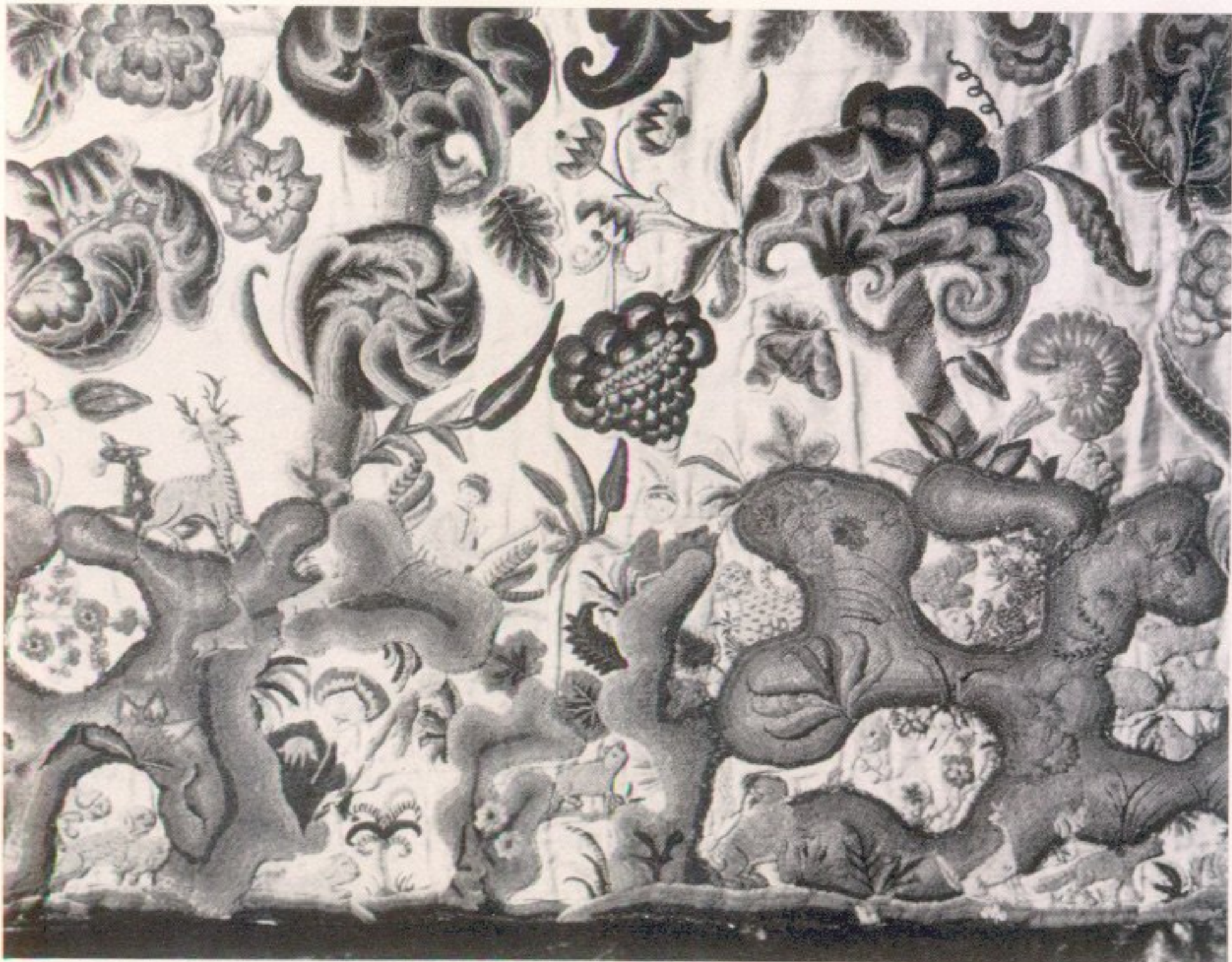
b Detail



a The Park panel



a The Cullen embroidery



b Detail