

Plots & Spangles: The Embroidered Vestments of Helena Wintour

16 October 2015 - 11 April 2016



The Magnificent Embroidered Vestments of Helena Wintour exhibited together for the first time in over 340 years

Auckland Castle, County Durham will present a major exhibition of embroidered liturgical vestments by Lady Helena Wintour (b. 1600), a collection that is described as the single most important body of work by a named Englishwoman in early modern times.

Helena Wintour was the daughter of one of the three Wintour brothers who were executed in 1606 for their part in the failed conspiracy to assassinate King James, in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Helena's collection of vestments were dispersed after her death, following a family dispute and finally came to reside respectively at Douai Abbey in Berkshire and Stonyhurst College. The collection has been reunited for the exhibition at Auckland Castle, the former palace of the Prince Bishops of Durham, through a partnership between Auckland Castle Trust with Stonyhurst College, the British Province of the Society of Jesus and Douai Abbey.

After the death of her father, Robert Wintour and two of his brothers when Helena was just 5 years old, she remained vehemently committed to her Catholic faith devoting her life to prayer, charitable works and the creation of her intricate embroidered work; an act of her devotion to her faith. Despite the Wintour family name's strong association with the Gunpowder Plot, she worked closely with the missionaries of the Jesuit order throughout her lifetime. She was known to have harboured priests at her home, on the family's estate in Worcestershire, despite the considerable risk to her own life as the crime was punishable by death. In death Helena bequeathed her collection of vestments to the Jesuit order; a final testament to her Catholic faith.

The exhibition will showcase the masterly technique and skill of Helena's needlework and the role of embroidery as part of a devotional way of life for Catholic women in seventeenth century Britain. Helena's vast intellectual capacity, which is revealed in her collection of work, is highlighted through

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the coded symbolism and iconography of the vestments, and the wider cultural resources she drew on, in particular the literature and spiritual writings that informed her knowledge and faith.

Highlight aspects of the collection include *The Wintour White Chasuble*, 1655, known as the 'Alleluia Vestment' on account of the embroidered inscription upon it. The piece depicts the vision of the Lamb on the Altar from the Book of Revelation from the New Testament. The scene is richly adorned with carnations, roses, tulips and pomegranates, which were symbols of Christ's life, death and resurrection and devotional connotations attributed to the Virgin Mary. This plant symbolism was common to Helena's vestments, drawn from specific flowers, plants and natural phenomena, which were common emblems of the Jesuit faith.

Further pieces illustrate the work of other notable Catholic women in the seventeenth century. Of particular note is *St Winefride's Chalice Veil*, 1610-1640, an intricate chalice veil embroidered by Mary Bodenham of Rotherwas, a member of the famous Catholic recusant family. The embroidery was made in celebration after her father in law, Sir Roger Bodenham was cured of a leg ailment at St Winefride's Well in 1606, at Holywell in Wales. The well had long been an important place of Catholic pilgrimage since the Middle Ages, with its underground spring, credited with healing properties. Pilgrims who visited the site included Katherine of Aragon and later James II and his wife Mary of Modena, who made the journey in secrecy in 1686. The intricate scene depicted on the veil depicts the narrative behind this mythology in vivid detail.

Many other rare and beautiful objects that offer an insight into Helena's life and Catholicism in seventeenth century Britain will be on display to the public in *Plots & Spangles - The Embroidered Vestments of Helena Wintour*:

- **The lantern carried by Guy Fawkes** when he was arrested in the cellars of the Houses of Parliament in 1605, on loan from the Ashmolean Museum. The piece will be displayed alongside original letters from the Gunpowder Plot conspirators from the collection of Stonyhurst College.
- **The Relic of the eyeball** of the executed English Jesuit priest and school friend of Guy Fawkes, Edward Oldcorne, on loan from Stonyhurst College. Oldcorne was executed in 1606 alongside John Wintour, Helena's uncle for his role in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot. The eye was collected at the scene of his execution at Red Hill in Worcester by a Catholic sympathiser and incased in a silver eye-shaped container to preserve the precious relic of the Catholic martyr.
- One of the most important books in English literature, William **Shakespeare's First Folio** on loan from Stonyhurst College, bequeathed to the institution by former pupil of the school, Thomas Lord Arundell of Wardour whose uncle was Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton. [Reference to Helena and use of Shakespeare plays as propaganda.](#)

Image Credits (Left to Right) Presented at Auckland Castle, County Durham

- *The Red Pentecost Chasuble, c 1660. Courtesy of the British Province of the Society of Jesus*
- *Detail of the White Alleluia Chasuble, c 1655. Courtesy of the British Province of the Society of Jesus*
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NOTES TO EDITORS

Auckland Castle - Auckland Castle is one of the most important episcopal palaces in Europe, and the magnificent home of the Prince Bishops of Durham, England's only Prince Bishop. Between 1832 and 2011, the castle was the official residence of the Bishops of Durham, and the Bishop of Durham still works there today. After Vatican City and Avignon, Auckland is described as the best working medieval Episcopal complex in Europe. Its Grade I listed architectural structures and features tell the history of our nation, in a building that has been created and recreated over the centuries by some of the leading

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architects of each age, including James Wyatt, architect to George III. No architectural work has been done on the castle since the 1790s, and it is expected that careful conservation work should reveal its hidden past. Together, the buildings and landscape form a nationally significant heritage site, with

highest Grade 1 level. Auckland Castle is also home to one of the most significant treasures of European religious art: in 1756 the then Bishop of Durham bought 13 paintings by Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664), depicting Jacob and his 12 sons, representing the 12 tribes of Israel. Auckland Castle is open from 10am daily except Tuesdays. Last admission 4pm.

The Auckland Castle Capital Project - The Auckland Castle Trust was established in the summer of 2012. The castle itself, with its deer park, derelict walled garden and paintings, including the internationally famous works of Jacob and his 12 Sons by the Spanish master Francisco de Zurbarán, formed the nucleus of the original holding.

The restoration of Auckland Castle will create a major new art and heritage destination in the North East of England and for the UK and an important culture-led social economic regeneration initiative for the North East of England. The Castle will be the setting for a nationally significant permanent exhibition of religious art in Britain with an extensive collection that includes one of the most important treasures of European religious art. A permanent collection of key works from the Spanish Golden Age will be supplemented with loans from the UK's leading institutions to create an exhibitions programme of genuine international significance. The restoration of one of the country's more important heritage sites will drive economic and social regeneration in Bishop Auckland, aiming to attract 120,000 visitors and generate £3 million of annual revenue per year to the area.

Stonyhurst College -

British Province of the Society of Jesus -

Douai Abbey -