Altar dossal

Place of origin: London (made)
Date: 1630s (made)
Artist/Maker: Harrison, Edmund, born 1590 - died 1667 (maker)
Materials and Techniques: Embroidery in silks and silver thread on silk velvet ground
Credit Line: Bequeathed by Peter C. Barker-Mill
Museum number: T.206-2009
Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description
This altar dossal was intended to be displayed above the back of an altar, in the setting of a Church of England chapel. It depicts the Last Supper, the gathering of Christ and his 12 disciples described in the New Testament. The embroidery dates from the period when William Laud was Archbishop of Canterbury. Laud laid great emphasis on the restoration of beauty and dignity to church decoration and worship. In the 1630s many entries in churchwardens’ accounts refer to the refurbishment of altars and pulpits and the provision of rich textiles for church furnishings.

The embroidery is likely to have been commissioned by Henry 5th Baron Sandys of the Vyne, in Hampshire, and is associated with an altar frontal also in the Museum’s collection, T.108-1963, with the Sandys arms and dated 1633. The exceptional quality and technique of the embroidery suggest that it was worked by Edmund Harrison, the King’s Embroiderer, and can be compared with the smaller picture of the Nativity in the V&A’s collection T.147-1930 signed by him. The print source for the dossal has been identified as an engraving of The Last Supper circa 1590, by Hieronymous Wierix (c.1553-1619) after Otto van Veen (1556-1629).

Descriptive line
Altar dossal, embroidered, The Last Supper, English, 1630s

Physical description
Ground of originally purple, now greenish black silk velvet. 4 widths seamed vertically, each 52.5 cm wide.
Central scene depicts The Last Supper : Christ with halo at top centre, and 12 disciples reclining on benches around a table with elaborate pedestal. Christ is offering bread to Judas (with money bag). On the table are three platters (one with lamb) and two goblets. Two hanging lights behind, with three candles each.
The embroidery has been constructed and applied as one large piece : cream satin ground is visible in some places representing the bench coverings, but most area is taken up with the heads and shirt-clad torsos of the figures, worked in shades of coloured silks, and their voluminous cloaks covering the rest of their reclining bodies in or nue. The table, vessels and bench legs are in silver thread.
Much black silk has fallen out. Some outlines of figures are emphasized with applied black cord, which may have been added later. The underdrawing is clearly visible in areas particularly the flesh (bare feet and faces). There is much padding under the figures which emphasizes the drapery and body contours.
There is a narrow (3cm) fringe of silver and silver-gilt at the top and sides, and a deep fringe at lower edge.
It has been applied to a plain woven linen backing.
There is some evidence of old water stains, particularly in the lower right quarter. The velvet is very vulnerable at bottom edge where it extends as far as the backing with no further protection. The velvet pile is worn in several places with two carefully darned short slits. There are some slits in the cream satin.
The pattern of wear at top suggests that tabs may have been attached at intervals. Also old nail holes through the velvet at top edge, concealed under the fringe.

Dimensions
Width: 214 cm including fringe, Height: 173 cm including fringe

Museum number
T.206-2009

Object history note
This altar dossal is the final item of a group of important 17th century ecclesiastical embroideries given to the Museum by Peter Barker-Mill (d.1994). It was received as a bequest after the death of his wife, who had a life interest in it. It is associated with the altar frontal T.108-1963, dated 1633, and the two are likely to have been commissioned by Henry 5th Baron Sandys of the Vyne. The exceptional quality and technique of the embroidery on this piece suggest that it was worked by Edmund Harrison, the King's Embroiderer, and can be compared with the smaller picture of the Nativity in the V&A's collection T.147-1930 signed by him.
The print source for the dossal has been identified as an engraving of The Last Supper circa 1590, by Hieronymous Wierix (c.1553-1619) after Otto van Veen (1556-1629).

Historical significance: This altar dossal and the 1633 frontal date from the period when William Laud was Archbishop of Canterbury. Laud laid
great emphasis on the restoration of beauty and dignity to church decoration and worship. In the 1630s many entries in churchwardens’ accounts refer to the refurbishment of altars and pulpits and the provision of rich textiles for church furnishings. The dossal joins the frontal as our most exceptional examples of English church textiles of this period.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1136086/altar-dossal-harrison-edmund/