Pair of waistcoat shapes

Place of origin: France (made)
Date: 1750-1759 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Silk, embroidered with silk
Gallery location: Europe 1600-1815, Room 2, The Wolfson Gallery, case CA1

Public access description

This extraordinary length of embroidered silk documents three important aspects of 18th-century dress: the high quality of French needlework, the sequence of decorating and sewing up waistcoats and the efforts to which the British went to acquire desirable French fashions.

To make an embroidered waistcoat, the needlework was done first on two lengths of fabric, one for the left front and the other for the right front. The lengths, known as waistcoat shapes, were purchased at a silk mercers or haberdashers, then taken to a tailor for making up into a waistcoat.

The stamp seen on the inside of the lower right edge reads 'Custom House / SEIZED DOVER / GR II', indicating that this is contraband – a French waistcoat shape apprehended during an attempt to smuggle it into England during the reign of George II (1727–60). For most of the 18th century, imported French silks and laces were taxed heavily, in order to protect British textile industries. Smuggling of these and other taxable goods was rife through all levels of society; customs officials at British ports searched very carefully and seized any contraband items. Articles confiscated in this manner were usually burned, so the survival of this beautiful but forbidden object is indeed remarkable.

Descriptive line

Pair of waistcoat shapes of embroidered ribbed silk, France, 1750-1759

Physical description

Pair of matching panels embroidered to shape to be made into a waistcoat. Each is a loom width, with pink striped selvedges, and roughly cut top and bottom edges.
On each the pattern for the waistcoat front is worked, with pocket flap. One panel has 12 worked buttonholes, uncut. The panels are of ivory ribbed silk, tamboured with silk in a pattern of rose buds in 3 shades of pink, with leaves and stems in shades of green and brown. There is also a twining outline to the edges of the decoration with pale blue and pink detailing.
Each panel has a customs stamp on the reverse.

Dimensions
Length: 860 mm, Width: 555 mm

Museum number
T.12&A-1981

Object history note
Purchased from Lawrence Antiques. No further provenance available.

Historical context note

Waistcoat panels worked like this were known as shapes in the 18th century. The areas of undecorated silk allowed the waistcoat to be cut and fitted to whatever size was required for the customer.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O117866/pair-of-waistcoat-unknown/