Public access description

Probably produced in Milan in the late 15th or early 16th century, this velvet has a pattern that can be identified as the sempervivum tectorum, a perennial plant that thrives in barren and mountainous places. Francesco Sforza (1401-66) adopted it as his heraldic device along with the motto Mit Zeit (with time). He may have been referring to his endurance and perseverance in obtaining his political position. During his reign (1450-66) the plant was represented only by the large central flower, isolated from stems and leaves and repeated across the width of the fabric three times. The motif evolved over the following twenty years into a more naturalistic version, such as is seen on this velvet.

This pattern on an even richer, gold brocaded velvet is represented on the stomacher and sleeve of a gown worn by Bianca Maria Sforza in a portrait by De Predis. This portrait was made to commemorate her marriage to Maximilian of Austria in 1493. In this context, the pattern probably referred directly to the dynasty from which she came.

Descriptive line
velvet, 1500-1529, Italian

Physical description
Red silk velvet. Two sempervium branches rise from a ring to create a two-pointed oval frame enclosing leaves and buds of the same plant. These boughs also branch out to the sides to enclose in a compartment different leaves and fruits - pomegranates, quinces and pears - in groups of three. Made up of several pieces of the velvet which have been pieced together to show the pattern.

Technical description (Lisa Monnas, 2009)
Weave structure. Single harness, solid cut-pile velvet in two heights of pile on an irregular 3/1 twill ground.
Warp. 3 main warps, 1 pile warp. Main warp is ivory/yellow silk, light S twist. Pile warp is silk, pelo, crimson without visible twist. Pattern step: 1 pile warp. Thread count per cm: 90 main warps, 30 pile warps.
Wefts. 3 ground wefts to 2 rods. Ground wefts: ivory/yellow silk without visible twist. Patterns step: 2 rods. Thread count per cm: 34/36 rods and 51/54 ground wefts.

Dyes (analysis by Maarten van Bommel, 2009).
Main warp: red woods and weld.
Pile warp: Polish cochineal, after treatment with tannins.
Ground weft: red woods and weld.

Dimensions
Height: 58.5 cm, Width: 50.0 cm

Museum number
593-1884

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O264120/woven-silk-unknown/