

Reliquary bags

People made pilgrimages to holy sites as part of the veneration of their religious beliefs. Often a Pilgrim would collect a memento of this trip, such as a pilgrim's badge. If the Pilgrim had the financial means, they might collect a relic of a saint. A relic could be any item connected to a saint such as a part of a piece of clothing or even a part of the body of the saint. These relics were highly prized and often housed in very precious containers. (Arm Reliquary, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Arm Reliquary: Journey from Divine to Fine Art, M. McLaughlin; Pilgrimage Routes and the Cult of the Relic, C. Bolli).

A Reliquary was a frequent item to contain relics or mementos of such a pilgrimage. Most pilgrims used a reliquary bag. These bags took many forms and were sometimes called alms purses. Such bags might also contain paternosters or religious readings like a prayer book. (Aumonieres, otherwise known as alms purses, T Kelly). I redacted my version of a reliquary bag in four styles; appliqued, beaded, cross stitched, and stamped fabric.

Reliquary bags came in all shapes, sizes, and materials. There are at least two reliquaries shaped as arms constructed of hammered silver and adorned with jewels. (Metropolitan Museum of Art; McLaughlin). St Stephen's Burse is encrusted with precious jewels. (The Meaning Behind the Appearance of the St. Stephen's Burse Reliquary, K. Schluterman). Some were constructed of more simple materials such as leather, linen, wool, or silk. (Kelly; Reliquary Bag, The Cleveland Museum of Art).

I chose to redact a reliquary bag in wool felt that was appliqued and embellished with beads. These bags were lined with silk or linen. I used simple geometric designs or simple nature designs for the applique. One bag was embellished with inkle weaving made of silk threads. There are examples of applique in Mamluk embroideries from the 1400 time period. (Textile Fragment with Mamluk Emblem, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). There are examples of applique in religious garments and altar adornments from 1488. (Applique and Silk Brocades, IK Foundation Workshop Society). These bags are rectangular in shape and closed with either a pin broach or an inkle woven tab and toggle or button. While inkle looms are rather late period for the SCA, they produce a woven band similar to those produced using a back strap loom. Back strap looms have been in use for quite some time. Evidence for their use is found in the Manila Galleon 1573 CE and earlier examples in Turkey about 6000 BCE (Chinese Textiles, Claudia Brown; Ribbons around the Silk Road – Before Silk (Toward a Pre-History of Band Weaving), E.J.W. Barber).

I also made reliquary bags using brocade and damask fabric. I embellished these with beading around or within the woven pattern of the fabric. Bags were often decorated with beads, precious and semi-precious stones, enameled plaques, and even a scarab. (10th Century Reliquary Pouch, J.Dellarena; 14th Century Reliquary bag, Schnutgen Museum; Kelly; IK Foundation). Some were rectangular in shape and some were circular. For those using a drawstring closure, I wove a narrow inkle band to use as the drawstring.

I used cross stitch patterns that were either specific heraldry for a group or based on historical items for the pattern. Cross stitch or over under stitches can be found in many cultural groups in history. Extant examples of this type of stitch, even counted stitches, can be found as early as the Zhou Dynasty which stretched from 1045 BCE to 221 BCE. A beautiful covered song book from the 1500s is edged in gold and black threads in a cross stitch pattern found in the Schloss Ambras Kunstkammer Castle (photographs by

Marion McNeally). Most notably are the needle work example done by Mary Queen of Scots. I chose to make the bags out of silk and border the cross stitch fabric with either band woven pieces or cotton lace. I am a relative beginner in needle work, so I chose to stitch on Aida cloth. In history, this stitching would have been done on an even weave linen.

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