



Or Nué Embroidery: The Height of Opulence

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What Is Or Nué ?

"Or Nué" is French for "shaded gold". It is a form of needle painting with silk threads used to couch down strands of gold. It originated in the 15th Century and became the fashionable style after the decline of Opus Anglicanum. It most likely originated in Flanders and was employed regularly in France, which is where we see it most prevalently. Thus many of the surviving pieces are termed of Franco-Flemish origin. However, the style was popular and well used all across Europe. Embroiderers liked the style because it allowed for greater versatility in design and gave the final product a much richer appearance. The people liked it because of its opulence and beauty. This popular style, although at its height in the 15th century, was commonly used well into the 17th century.

What Are Some Period Examples?

When thinking of Or Nué Embroidery there are three groups of extant pieces that immediately come to mind. Perhaps the most amazing examples of this style are the vestments of the Order of the Golden Fleece. This group of embroideries show the use of the Or Nué technique at its prime. They were made in Brussels for the Duke of Burgundy in the mid 1400's. This group of vestments consists of 3 copes, 2 dalmatics, a chasuble, an altar frontal and dossal. These vestments employ the Or Nué technique at its height and with considerable variations. They are encrusted with jewels and seed pearls and have been described as "shining with the brilliance of heaven".

The second most well known, though less impressive, group are the St. Martin Embroideries. These embroideries are of Franco-Flemish origin. They consist of a group of roundels and a group of panels that, it is believed, once made up a large altar frontal. Scholars date the earliest of the embroidery to around 1430. The interesting thing to note about these embroideries is that they show the beginnings of the use of the Or Nué technique. In later years it became common for vestments to be embroidered in this way, but these particular embroideries show Or Nué in its infant stages.

Last but not least are the San Giovanni (St. John the Baptist) Embroideries. These magnificent vestments were commissioned by the Arte di Calimala Guild, who were cloth importers and exporters. The embroideries consisted of vestments for each of the Priests of the San Giovanni Baptistery. The vestments included chasubles, albs, copes and dalmatics. The embroideries included 27 scenes from the life of St. John the Baptist. The Calimala Guild founded an entire workshop in 1466 with the sole purpose of creating these pieces. The designs were created by painter Antonio Pollaiuolo for a fee of 90 florins. Once the designs were completed Masters of Embroidery were brought in from all over Europe to complete the project. The embroideries were completed in 1480 at which time the actual vestments began being created. This group of embroideries are beautiful examples of the Or Nué technique employed in Italy.

How Was It Done?

From studying worn areas in surviving extant pieces, we can see that the designs were painted on the fabric for the embroiderer to follow. This was most likely done by a professional artist, as opposed to the embroiderer. The embroiderer would then take the design and begin couching down gold threads horizontally with skillfully spaced colored silk threads. The closer together the silk threads were placed, the darker the shade. For highlights and reflections of light the colored silks were placed farther apart. This gave a unique shaded effect to the picture which, when completed, was just as detailed and lovely as a painting.

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