With Bells on His Toes

ALICE ZREBIEC

Associate Curator in Charge, Textile Study Room,
European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

IN 1983 THE MUSEUM ACQUIRED a most intriguing object, an embroidered emblem of a sixteenth-century shoemakers' guild (Figure 1).[1] This medallion, which is about 40 cm. in diameter, is expertly and exquisitely made in a combination of metal thread, raised work, and appliqué embroidery techniques.[2] Set against a blue-green silk satin background[3] the central image is a red silk Gothic shoe, whose long, pointed toe ends in a golden acorn-shaped bell. The body of the shoe is in high relief, elaborately decorated with floral and foliate motifs worked in gilt metal thread and pierced by a golden arrow. Surmounting the shoe is a crown with fleurons on points. In the band of the crown one pierced piece of gilt glass[4] is still attached, and cut or broken sewing threads suggest that similar ornaments originally appeared above, below, and to the sides of the star-shaped settings, the centers of which were initially further embellished.

A shield with floral decorations similar to those on the shoe encloses these two main motifs, and to either side of it appear two figures of the date 1584. The whole is encircled by a stylized laurel wreath with appliqué leaves of green silk outlined by green silk cords, and raised buds of woven silk and silver metal-thread material, formerly painted. At the top and bottom of the wreath is an applied metal-thread embroidered blossom, possibly an extremely stylized edelweiss. Leaves or tongs in a curving X-form, worked in a similar manner to the flowers and now missing part of their decorative side elements, bind the wreath at right and left.

Medallions such as this had a specific use in the funeral ceremonies of the guilds of the German empire during the sixteenth century and later. Used in pairs connected by a ribbon, they were hung over the coffin, which was covered with a black velvet pall, whose corners bore additional guild emblems. Resting on top of the pall was the crown of the dead, an elaborate construction of leaves and silver and gold lace. The burial of a guild member was a very important obligation and all members, masters and journeymen alike, had to attend, under pain of strict penalties. As for the deceased, this final ceremony was yet another moment of his life governed by the regulations of the guild.[5]

All of the funeral regalia—coffin to shields to crown—belonged to the guild, with the most valuable and valued objects often being the embroidered pall shields. The most sumptuous of these date from the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century; they were professionally embroidered with fine materials, often in high relief, and depict emblems or pictorial scenes directly related to the specific guild. Less ambitious shields exist in chased silver or gold-plated copper, or, for smaller guilds or guilds of restricted means, in carved wood or painted sheet metal. The embroidered shields, however, remain the masterpieces of this genre.[6]

Because of their great symbolic and monetary value it is not surprising that a number of these respected objects survive. A sizable collection is in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, a city considered to be a center of production for this type of work.[7] Although two examples bear the same date as the Museum's shield and several employ the Renaissance framing device of a wreath, none is identical to the Museum's nor does any represent a shoemakers' guild.[8]

While a date is often part of the composition, authorship or place of execution is much more difficult to ascertain unless tradition or iconography connects

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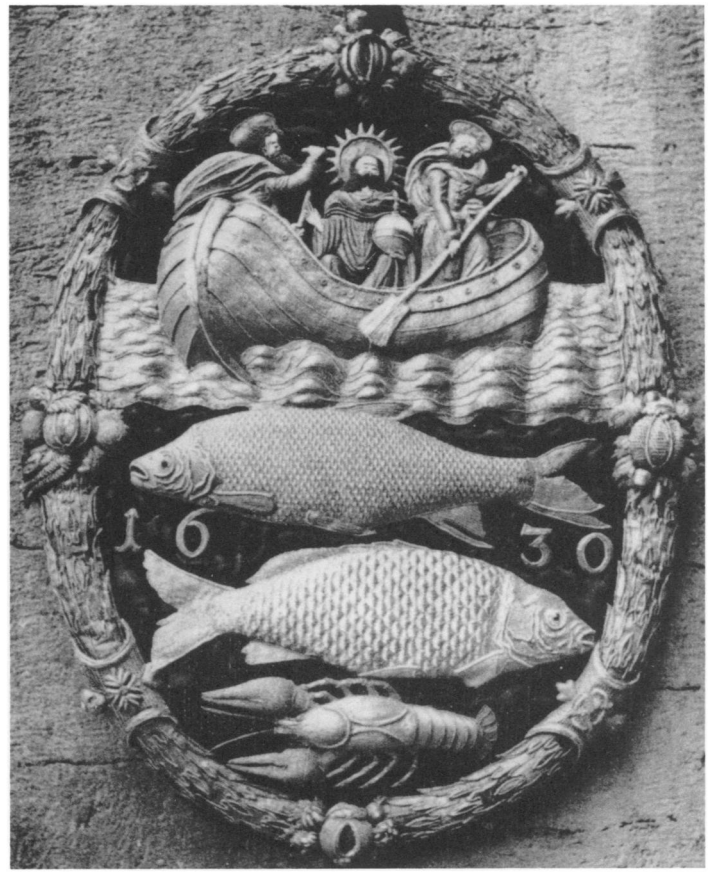
a shield with a specific local guild. Two fortunate exceptions are a bakers' and a fishermen's guild shield dating from 1574/5, in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich. These are signed on the back by the maker, Wolfgang Popp, who is known from records to have been a silk embroiderer in the painters' guild of Passau from 1563 to 1574.[9]

Nearly all the embroidered guild shields employ raised work, a technique particularly popular in Central Europe at this time and carried to its greatest extremes in Hungary and Poland.[10] The artistic results, however, vary greatly. In the Passau fishermen's guild shield (Figure 2) the main figures and boat are in very high relief and appear quite three-dimensional in contrast to the background cityscape painted over silk and metal threads.[11] This approach differs dramatically from that of a Regensburg fishermen's guild pall shield (Figure 3) made more than fifty years later; in this exuberant example, the boat with Christ and the apostles, as well as the fish and crayfish, are in such high relief as to appear sculpted.

The Museum's guild shield achieves yet another effect. The raised work is in varying heights—slight for some details, extreme for the shoe. When contrasted with the flat, couched metal-thread embroidery of

1. Shoemakers' guild shield, German or Polish, 1584. Silk and metal-thread embroidery, Diam. ca. 16 in. (40.6 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1983, 1983.364

2. Wolfgang Popp, Fishermen's guild shield, German (Passau), 1574–75. Silk and metal-thread embroidery, H. 29 in. (73.7 cm.). Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum (photo: Bayerisches Nationalmuseum)



3. Regensburg fishermen's guild shield, German, 1630. Silk and metal-thread embroidery. Regensburg, Museen der Stadt Regensburg (photo: from Gröber, *Alte deusche Zunftherrlichkeit,* p. 115)

other elements, these differences in relief produce a three-dimensional but not realistic image, which stresses the importance of the anachronistic shoe as a symbol or icon. The directness of this presentation is all the more apparent when compared to that of the more complicated and sophisticated emblem of the Prague shoemakers' guild (Figure 4), in which not a shoe but three stockinged legs are arranged in a whorl within a shield supported by two fashionably dressed bearers.

The form of the Museum's shoe, which went out of fashion by the late fifteenth century, does not suggest that the embroidery is retardataire in style; rather it conforms to a type, the Gothic *Schnabelschuh,* or beaked shoe, which was also the model for drinking vessels for ceremonial guild use (Figure 5) and non-guild love tokens.[12] Made of leather, like the example illustrated, or of tin, silver, or gilt silver, these cups, a number of which survive, date primarily from the late fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. Although

4. Prague shoemakers' guild shield, Czech, 1591. Location unknown (photo: from *CIBA Review* 13, p. 431)

5.
Guild cup, German, late 16th century. Leather and silver, 5⅜ × 8⅛ in. (13.7 × 20.6 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.190.608ab

tradition probably accounts for the continued use of this form, one might well wonder why the guild adopted as its symbol this particular shape of shoe—with a high, well-defined arch and a long, pointed, curved toe—especially as its use had long been proscribed by civil and religious authorities as frivolously excessive and indicative of immoral behavior.[13]

Introduced in the eleventh century in France, this exaggerated type of footwear—also called a *poulaine* or *cracowe* or *pontaine*—found favor in numerous countries. Although it began as a modest extension, the length of the toe continued to grow and reached a preposterous dimension, sometimes as long as twenty-four inches; in extreme instances the end had to be attached to the knee or lower leg to prevent tripping. Moss, wool, or a similar filler material kept the toe erect, and a bell was sometimes added to the tip. Jingling as the wearer walked, the bell drew attention to him and to the obvious phallic symbolism of the extended toes.[14] This particular form of shoe is also considered a fertility symbol,[15] an idea reinforced in our shield by the piercing arrow and the acorn-shaped bell.

While it is not clear to what extent these different meanings and traditions overlap in explaining this particular example, it is obvious that its imagery is highly evocative with many implications, not the least puzzling of which is the interpretation of the arrow with reference to the guild. When standard research sources yielded no answers, I consulted Helmut Nickel. Searching into his vast archival memory, he recalled a story he had heard as a student that might offer a clue.

Hans von Liegnitz, a legendary Silesian hero, fought valiantly to defend his city successfully, despite being wounded in the foot. Dr. Nickel suggests that this apocryphal story may have been devised to explain the motif of the arrow-pierced shoe. It is also possible that this explanation could have been used to make the traditional but proscribed shoe type more legitimate and acceptable as a symbol, while perhaps providing the latitude for an inside joke. Dr. Nickel further observes that the crown depicted on the shield is not the imperial one, but rather a type that was a mark of distinction in eastern Germany, Bohemia, and parts of Poland.

Liegnitz, once the seat of a duchy, passed from Polish control to Hapsburg rule. Today known as Leg-

nica and again in Poland, the city is not at an altitude high enough to sustain the edelweiss pictured on the Museum's shield but could have been included solely for its symbolic value. In addition, the medallion came to the Museum from a Polish collection. Since there are no technical or stylistic reasons to suggest otherwise, one may attribute the shield to Silesia or a nearby region.

Although the riddle of this object's iconography is not fully explained, this attempt to solve its mystery would not have been possible without Dr. Nickel's provocative thoughts and erudite insights.

NOTES

1. MMA, Acc. no. 1983.364.

2. The embroidery is executed primarily in couched metal threads worked without padding or over it to give different levels of relief. The types of metal threads used include the following: (1) a gilt metal strip of varying widths wrapped in an S direction—sometimes closely, sometimes spaced—about a yellow silk core thread, used singly and in pairs. A sample examined with a scanning electron microscope and an energy-dispersive X-ray spectrometer by Mark Wypyski, research assistant in the Museum's Department of Objects Conservation, was found to be a silver and copper alloy gilt on only one side. When closely wrapped, these threads are used in areas requiring a dense gold color and are couched, as for the numbers of the date; alternatively, they are worked over slight padding to achieve a low relief, as for the arrow and acorn; (2) two or three of the same types of thread with spaced wrapping, but plied together in a Z direction; (3) the same type of thread, single, but plied Z with a metal wire and subsequently twisted about a yellow silk sewing thread to produce an effect similiar to purl; (4) gilt wire wrapped about a thick core of silk with a metal-wire spine.

Some areas are in appliqué: the shoe, the wreath, and its decorations. The latter two areas use woven silks with a metal thread supplementary weft. Mark Wypyski examined a sample of this weft and found it to be silver with a significant amount of sulfur and a small amount of chlorine corrosion. Padding for the metal-thread embroidered and appliqué areas includes thick linen cords (Z), and plain-weave woven linen (top layer of padding for the shoe).

3. Both the blue-green and red silk fabrics are 7.1 satins with an interruption of 4.

4. George Wheeler, associate chemist in the Department of Objects Conservation at the Museum, kindly provided the identification of this decoration as a vitreous material, gilt and cut to allow the passage of the thread.

5. Karl Gröber, *Alte deutsche Zunftherrlichkeit* (Munich, 1936) pp. 114–116; G. de Francesco, "Guild Emblems and their Significance," *CIBA Review* 13 (1938) p. 431.

6. Gröber, *Alte deutsche Zunftherrlichkeit*, pp. 116–117; de Francesco, "Guild Emblems," p. 431.

7. My thanks to Dr. Leonie von Wilckens for bringing these examples to my attention. The shields are described in the detailed catalogue by Hans Stegmann, *Katalog der Gewebesammlung des Germanischen Nationalmuseums* (Nuremberg, 1901) II, p. 21, nos. 2492–2502.

8. Ibid, nos. 2492 and 2493 are dated 1584.

9. Sigrid Müller-Christensen, "Passauer Reliefstickerei des 16. Jahrhunderts," *Pantheon* 6 (1942) p. 145; Heinrich Kohlhaussen, *Geschichte des deutschen Kunsthandwerks* (Munich, 1955) p. 419 and p. 417, fig. 390; Sigrid Müller-Christensen, *A Pictorial History of Embroidery*, Donald King, trans. (New York, 1963) p. 320.

10. Müller-Christensen, "Passauer Reliefstickerei," p. 146; Kohlhaussen, *Geschichte*, p. 418.

11. Müller-Christensen, *Pictorial History*, p. 320.

12. Paul Weber, *Schuhe* (Stuttgart, 1980) pp. 44–45.

13. Paul Lacroix, *Histoire de la Chaussure* (Paris, 1862) p. 51.

14. Ibid, pp. 47ff., discusses the history and development of this type of shoe, as does William A. Rossi, who in *The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe* (New York, 1976) pp. 105ff., further elaborates on its socio-sexual interpretation and its use as a dildo.

15. Weber, *Schuhe*, p. 44.