

Press Release, 12 April 2012

## **Special Exhibition 2012**

### **Ornamenta Textile Images of the Middle Ages**

29 April – 11 November 2012  
Open daily from 2 p.m. to 5.30 p.m.

**Churches in the Middle Ages were richly adorned with textiles. In addition to wall hangings, banners, carpets and altar-frontals, the liturgical vestments worn by the clergy were also a significant embellishment. This special exhibition reveals the variety and splendour of such textile *ornamenta* and explains their various themes and functions.**

This is the first special exhibition to be held in the Abegg-Stiftung's remodelled museum, which opened with a new permanent exhibition last autumn. The 200 m<sup>2</sup> of space adjoining the permanent exhibition will be used to present a wide range of the textiles that decorated the interiors of churches and chapels between the thirteenth and the sixteenth century. The textiles were more than just decoration, however, for their colours and above all the figural scenes they depicted also referred to the events celebrated throughout the liturgical year. Whether woven or embroidered, many of the pieces are narrative in character and in some cases very vivid and dramatic.

Whereas the word "ornament" these days merely signifies repetitive, often abstract or abstracted patterns, the medieval definition of the Latin word *ornamenta* was much broader and covered a wide range of decorative items and furnishings used during the liturgy and to decorate the interior of the church. Utensils such as chalice, monstrance and candelabra thus all count as *ornamenta*, as does a wide range of textiles. And it is these textiles that are the focus of this special exhibition.

#### **DIFFERENT ORNAMENTA FOR EACH FEAST DAY**

Unlike paintings or sculptures, which tended to be permanent fixtures, textile *ornamenta* could easily be removed and replaced, allowing different ones to be used for each of the feasts of the liturgical year. Whether it was Christmas, Easter, Pentecost or any other feast, there were special textiles and vestments for almost all the holy days and others for the times in between. Thus it was customary for the interior of the church to regularly change its appearance.

#### **THE FUNCTION OF TEXTILE IMAGES**

The textile images recount episodes from the life of Jesus, from his forefathers and his own childhood to the Passion and the story of his followers, the Apostles and the saints. Even

theological concepts such as the transubstantiation of the bread and the wine into the body and blood of Christ were explained with the aid of textile images. These depictions were closely related to the function of the textiles in the liturgy. To commemorate Christ's sacrifice, for example, the vestments worn by the priest celebrating the Eucharist bore a depiction of the Crucifixion with angels holding out a chalice to collect the blood of Christ. The liturgical vestments showing the Resurrection, by contrast, clearly allude to the events of Eastertide and their promise of salvation. The objects exhibited thus remind us of all the key themes of Christianity.

One important and very popular motif in sacred textile art is the Annunciation to the Virgin. The examples of this in the special exhibition include a large tapestry, fabrics with pattern repeats and several embroidered items in different formats. Visitors are thus invited to draw comparisons between the various techniques and the visualisation strategies they used. Such comparisons also reveal just how carefully the material, technique and iconographic program were chosen in each case – always with a view to the function the textile was to have.

#### HANGINGS AND ORPHREYS

A Flemish tapestry dating from around 1500 features an impressive rendering of the Annunciation. The monumental figures and perspective view of the interior greatly enhance its impact, suggesting that it would have dominated the interior of the church or chapel in which it originally hung. While such large textiles would have been clearly visible to all churchgoers, the smaller depictions on the orphreys adorning the liturgical vestments could be appreciated – then, as now – only close up. The embroidered scenes are often very detailed and extremely finely worked. Because embroidery allows a good deal more latitude than weaving, embroiderers could give their figures individual faces or liven up certain scenes by adding details such as the little mouse in one of the scenes from the childhood of Jesus. Special effects such as a gold ground in swirls were also possible. Yet many vestments featured orphreys with woven designs as well. While the motifs by their very nature repeat themselves, the graphic and in many cases rhythmic quality of these pieces cannot fail to impress.

#### A BEADED TREASURE

All the items exhibited belong to the collection of the Abegg-Stiftung – or rather all but one: the exception is a ciborium from the Schnütgen Museum in Cologne, which was entrusted to the Abegg-Stiftung for conservation. Before being returned to Cologne, however, the receptacle is going on show in the special exhibition in Riggisberg. Made to hold the Host, the ciborium is lavishly embellished with sewn-on beads made of coral, freshwater pearls, glass and gold as well as metal appliqués, and it is a rare medieval treasure of this kind.

Please contact us if you would like to receive a media release and/or images by e-mail.

A new catalogue raisonné will be published with the exhibition opening:  
Evelin Wetter

#### **Mittelalterliche Textilien III**

#### **Stickerei bis um 1500 und figürlich gewebte Borten**

(Die Textilsammlung der Abegg-Stiftung Band 6)

with English translation of the introducing texts

ca. 400 pages, 202 mostly colour illustrations

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CHF 280.-- + postage; at the exhibition: CHF 200.--