

# ABEGG-STIFTUNG

Media Release, April 2024

## SPECIAL EXHIBITION 2024

### THE DECEIVED EYE TEXTILE EFFECTS AND THEIR SIMULATION

28 APRIL – 10 NOVEMBER 2024

OPEN DAILY FROM 2 P.M. TO 5.30 P.M.



*So what is it? A velvet, an embroidery, a painting? Not everything in this year's special exhibition is what it seems at first glance. The fabrics, embroideries, wall hangings and vestments dating from the fourth to the seventeenth century are shining examples of textile trompe l'œils.*

Pliny the Elder (d. 79 A.D.), in his Natural History, tells of a painting contest in which Zeuxis of Herakleia painted grapes that looked so deceptively real that birds flew by to peck at them. The work submitted by Parrhasios of Ephesos, by comparison, showed a curtain painted with such realism that Zeuxis himself impatiently demanded that it be drawn aside so that he could view the picture behind it. The perfect imitation of nature has been hailed as evidence of consummate artistic skill since Antiquity. Sumptuous fabrics with gleaming gold effects and a silken sheen are an especially rewarding motif for painters eager to put their ability to the test. But those seeking to simulate textiles and textile effects have long done so not just in painting but also in other textile techniques including tapestry, weaving, fabric printing and embroidery. While the subject of trompe l'œil in painting has attracted widespread attention over the past few decades, the Abegg-Stiftung's special exhibition on the representation of fabrics and their distinctive qualities in other textile arts is the first of its kind.

#### TEXTILES IN TEXTILES

How might a textile be represented? How might an exquisite silk, for example, be rendered recognisable? These are the questions informing the first part of the exhibition. The key factors in any credible reproduction of the identifiable properties of a given textile are its colour, sheen, or pattern. One good example of this is the red coat worn by a young man on a woollen tapestry. The pattern indicates that the cloth was woven on a complex loom and is reproduced with such precision that even the type of weave can be identified. Such symmetrical patterns of floral motifs are typical of silk damasks of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, as demonstrated by the sample exhibited alongside the tapestry. This comparison provides vivid proof of just how accurately this textile was reproduced. With several such pairings in the exhibition, visitors are able to compare other textiles with their representations.

## **SIMULATING TEXTILES**

One advantage of depicting textiles in other textiles is that textile effects can be not just visualised, but their actual structures simulated. This is the theme of the second part of the exhibition. Featured here is a fine green and gold cope that looks as if it is made of velvet with gold brocading. On closer inspection, however, it turns out that while it is indeed a velvet, the gold motifs are embroidered, not woven. Here the characteristic appearance of one textile technique has been simulated deceptively well in another. Indeed, visitors will frequently be surprised to discover that not all the exhibits shown here are quite what they seem at first glance. This is certainly true of the fifteenth-century chasuble cross with its velvety-looking beige-red ground. The “velvet” is only simulated, however, this being a rare example of an embroidered pile. Because pile fabrics require six times the amount of material as pileless fabrics, velvets ranked among the most expensive textiles of the age. The simulation of such materials was not a cheap alternative, however; on the contrary, such an artful play of textile materials was valuable in its own right. A brief film explaining how velvet is made underscores this by also showing a pile being embroidered.

## **TEXTILE TROMPE L'ŒILS**

A tulip and a carnation arranged together with other flowers in a Chinese porcelain vase is just the kind of composition we might expect of a still life painting; but appearances are deceptive, because this is not a painting but an embroidery. The embroiderer Anthonij Janssen of Amsterdam even signed his masterpiece, evidently unafraid to have it measured against the great still life paintings of the day. The textile trompe l'œils in the last part of the exhibition call for an alert eye. Elements that seem to belong both to the pictorial space and to the viewer's space are at once perplexing and an inducement to look more closely. Sometimes there are motifs such as frames, windows or curtains to connect the two, as in a remarkable tapestry from sixteenth-century Brussels. The scene of an Arcadian landscape with Virgin and Child is set inside a frame composed of flowers and birds, which in its turn is bordered by a red strip, as if the framed image had been placed on a velvet mount. Depending on the fall of light, the pile on a velvet makes either for great depth of colour or for a lustrous sheen. The tapestry reproduces this characteristic effect with woollen threads in four shades of red as well as gold threads. To perfect the illusion, even the velvet's typically green selvage has been faithfully reproduced. Here, the textile in a textile functions at once as a liminal motif and as a badge of dignity for a precious devotional textile. Visual pleasure awaits those who look carefully.

Both press release and photos are available as e-mail attachments.

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Caption:

Embroidered floral still life; Amsterdam, signed Anthonij Janssen, c. 1650; Abegg-Stiftung, inv. no. 2225