

EDINBURGH  
CASTLE



# THE QUEEN'S EMBROIDERIES









The Queen's Embroideries, on display at Edinburgh Castle, are replicas of 37 needlework panels created by Mary Queen of Scots during her exile in England.

# THE QUEEN'S EMBROIDERIES

**Left:** Mary Queen of Scots, who was forced to abdicate her throne in 1568 and fled Scotland.

**Previous page:** The replica embroideries sewn onto a replica of the hanging that they were attached to, probably in the 1600s.

Mary worked on the embroideries while under house arrest, sewing with the noblewoman Bess of Hardwick, the wife of her jailer. The two women struck up an unlikely friendship before Mary was moved to new accommodation in 1585. Her cousin, the English Queen Elizabeth, ordered her execution two years later.

The original embroideries are displayed at Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk.

The replica embroideries were made by the School of Ancient Crafts. Thirty-three volunteers spent more than 7,000 hours on the project between 2014-17. They used only authentic materials, including silk, velvet and cloth of gold, and replica 16th-century tools and techniques.



### THE SOLEN GOOSE

(gannet) is a large sea bird, renowned for the way it dives to catch fish. It may have appealed to Mary because of its strong Scottish connections. Her model was an illustration by Swiss naturalist Conrad Gessner, who described it as a type of goose found on the Bass Rock off the coast of East Lothian – the world's largest gannet colony.

### SOLEN GOOSE



**THE PHOENIX** is a mythical bird that bursts into flames as it dies, only to be reborn and rise again from the ashes. It was a symbol adopted by Mary of Guise, Mary's beloved mother and a former regent of Scotland.

### PHOENIX



### TURTLE DOVE

**THE TURTLE DOVE** is celebrated for taking only one mate, to which it is always faithful. It symbolises the church and its faith in Christ. Mary kept pet turtle doves during her captivity in England, along with dogs and caged birds from France. Gessner again provided the model for the embroidery.

**Below:** The top of the original dragon panel was cut off, probably in the 1600s.



### DRAGON

**THE DRAGON** is a feared mythical creature that often symbolises doom. People spoke of seeing a dragon above Edinburgh Castle during Mary's reign, while William Cecil, advisor to Queen Elizabeth, described Mary as a 'monstrous dragon'.



**THREE MARIGOLDS** are shown turning towards the sun while the Latin text reads *non inferiora secutus* – ‘not having followed lower things’. This was the motto of Mary’s French sister-in-law from her first marriage, Marguerite, and perhaps also a declaration of her Roman Catholic faith.

### MARIGOLDS



### BIRD OF AMERICA

**THE TOUCAN** embroidery is based on an illustration by the French explorer André Thévet, who encountered the bird on an expedition to Brazil in the 1550s. The trip was led by the renowned sailor Nicolas de Villegaignon, the same man who had taken five-year-old Mary from Scotland to France in 1548 and returned her to begin her personal reign in 1560. An inventory of Edinburgh Castle noted that Mary owned ‘the beik of a foule of India or Brasile’ – possibly from the very same bird shown in Thévet’s illustration.

**THE UNICORN**, a symbol of purity and grace, is the national animal of Scotland. Two unicorns supported Mary’s royal coat of arms as they had done for generations of her royal line. She based her embroidery on a Gessner illustration but turned the creature’s head back so its horn fitted the frame.

### UNICORN



### EAGLE AND HARE

**AN EAGLE** is shown clutching a dead hare in its talons, alongside a marigold and a rose. A Gessner illustration provided the template for the embroidery. Hawking was among Mary’s favourite pastimes. While falcons and hawks were the most commonly used birds of prey, eagles were sometimes trained to hunt.

**THIS EMBROIDERY** features particularly clever word play. The letters of the crowned monogram spell the queen’s French name Maria Steuuart and the Latin text *sa vertu matire* – ‘its strength attracts me’ – is an anagram of Mary’s name. There are also two thistles, symbols of Scotland.

### MONOGRAM





**THE PELICAN** is a symbol of Christian sacrifice as it was widely believed to peck its breast to feed its own blood to its young. A Gessner illustration provided the model for Mary's embroidery.

### PELICAN



### LION

**THE LION** symbolises courage, strength and royalty, all attributes that could be references to Mary. They often featured in the royal menagerie – Mary's father James V had one – and the animal in the embroidery is clearly being kept indoors. Again, the model came from a Gessner illustration. The lion was also a symbol of Christ resurrected from the dead.

**THE MYTHICAL COCKATRICE** is a two-legged dragon with the head of a cockerel and the tail of a serpent, able to kill merely by looking at a person. Mary modelled her embroidery on a Gessner drawing and gave the creature a crown, a reference to the Greek origin of the word *basilisk* – with which the cockatrice was equated – meaning 'little king'.

### COCKATRICE



### TORTOISE AND PALM TREE

**A TORTOISE** is shown climbing the trunk of a palm tree topped with a crown. The Latin text *dat gloria vires* means 'glory gives me strength' – this could symbolise human aspiration. Alternatively, the tortoise (known in Scots as a shell-paddock – a toad in a shell) scaling the glorious, upright palm could be a coded insult to Mary's ambitious second husband Lord Darnley and his desire to be recognised as king of Scotland. Rumours about Mary's role in Darnley's murder dogged her time in English captivity. The design first appeared on a commemorative coin issued in 1566 to mark the royal marriage.



**PHEASANTS** were a highly prized food of the rich, and could only be hunted by the nobility. The beautiful plumage of the male bird made it ideal for the royal banqueting table. Mary turned to Gessner for his drawing of the pheasant – see how she had to split its tail feathers into two pieces in order to fit it within the frame.

PHEASANT



**THE APPLE TREE** with the surrounding Latin text *pulchriori detur* – ‘let it be given to the fairer’ – alludes to the legendary Judgement of Paris. In the ancient Greek story, the Trojan prince awarded the Golden Apple of Discord to the fairest of the goddesses. This might hint at the rivalry between Mary and her English cousin Queen Elizabeth.

APPLE TREE



ONCE

**THE ONCE** (lynx) embroidery shows the big cat walking over floorboards. Perhaps it was deliberately depicted as an animal in a royal menagerie. The lynx was a native species that had become extinct in Scotland centuries before Mary’s time. A Gessner illustration was copied for the embroidery.

THIRD ROW



CENTREPIECE

A **DISEMBODIED HAND** reaches down from the heavens to prune an unfruitful branch of a vine. The Latin text reads *virescit vulnere virtus* – ‘virtue flourishes from its

wounds’. Mary sent the original embroidery to the Duke of Norfolk, with whom she was considering marriage. It was subsequently used as evidence against the duke in

his treason trial, its design interpreted as meaning the childless Elizabeth had to be replaced by the fruitful Mary as Queen of England. Norfolk was executed in 1572.



**THE CENTRAL MONOGRAM** of this embroidery may hint at the troubled relationship between Mary and her English cousin Elizabeth. The letters spell the names of both queens while the Latin text reads *arctiora sunt virtutis vincula quam sanguinis* – ‘the bonds of virtue are tighter than those of blood’. The Scottish thistle is being crushed beneath the monogram.

MONOGRAM



HART

**THE HART** or stag was hunted by royalty and nobility. Its pursuit was considered the most prestigious form of hunting, which Mary adored. The hart is also a symbol of Christ. The embroidery takes a Gessner illustration as its template.



BEES

**BEES** were considered to be humble, industrious, loyal and a worthy model for humanity. They also represented the Christian congregation of the faithful. In Mary's embroidery, the hive has a church-like quality and perhaps its three doors symbolise the Holy Trinity. The bees might hint at Mary's faithful followers toiling on behalf of their queen.





ZYPHWHALE

**THE ZYPHWHALE** is a sea monster that may actually have been a swordfish. Mariners' stories about such creatures were often distorted and exaggerated. Mary uses an illustration by Gessner, who describes the creature as 'a most formidable sea whale', capable of swallowing seals whole.



TIGER

**THE TIGER**, copied from a Gessner illustration, is shown cowed with its tail tucked between its legs. It stands on a brightly-checkered floor. A similar floor appears on another of Mary's embroideries showing a ginger cat (possibly representing Queen Elizabeth) toying with a mouse (maybe representing Mary), which is now kept at the Palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh.



HORSE

**HORSES** were a passion of the queen and she was considered an accomplished horsewoman. At the start of her captivity in England, she kept as many as ten horses and had three grooms and a farrier – a blacksmith specialising in horse shoes – in her household. In those early days, she was permitted to ride in the countryside around her quarters (although closely escorted by her captors) but this privilege was soon withdrawn.



SNAILS

**THESE SNAILS** are copied from a Gessner illustration. Mary added a strawberry plant to the scene. While the snail was thought to be a creature born of mud and a symbol of the sinner, the strawberry plant represents paradise. Maybe this design shows that all sinners may find redemption.



MOTTO



**BENEATH** the foliage, a serpent is coiled around this plant's stem. The Latin motto reads *sub herba latet anguis* – 'a snake lurks under the grass'. It is one of the mottos collected by the French writer Claude Paradin but it is not clear who or what this snake represented to Mary.



DOLPHIN

**MARY'S CROWNED INITIALS MR** indicate her identification with the dolphin. It was both a badge of the French heir to the throne and a pun on the title *dauphin*, which Mary's husband Francis bore until his coronation as king of France in 1559. The design was copied from an illustration by the French naturalist Pierre Belon.

SEA MONK



**THE SEA MONK** has the body of a fish but the head and cowl of a monk. Mary based her embroidery on a Belon illustration. Hector Boece, principal of King's College, Aberdeen, wrote that sea monks (called *basinats* in the Scots language) had been seen rising out of the waters of the Firth of Forth, and were considered phantoms of ill omen.



MONOGRAM

**THE CENTRAL MONOGRAM** of this embroidery spells out 'GEORGE ELIZABETH' while the text around the edge reads: 'George Elizabeth Shrewsbury'. George, Earl of Shrewsbury, was Mary's captor during her first 15 years of captivity. His wife, Elizabeth – known as Bess of Hardwick – befriended the queen and often sewed alongside her.



SEA RHINOCEROS

**THE SEA RHINOCEROS** has the tail and fin of a shark, seal-like flippers and a reptilian head. Such monsters were based on the fictionalised retelling of sailors' encounters with real sea creatures. The embroidery is based on one of Gessner's illustrations in which the monster is shown eating a giant lobster.



**THE BUTTERFLY** represents the Resurrection of Christ because it emerges from the 'coffin' of its chrysalis. It is also a symbol of the soul and immortality. The central butterfly in Mary's embroidery is poised ready to take flight from the marigold on which it sits. Maybe this represented the queen's Christian faith or possibly her hope to rise again after her abdication.

BUTTERFLIES



MOTTO

**THE LATIN MOTTO** depicts a plant with elaborate foliage and flowers. The Latin text reads *ne nimium crede colori* – 'do not place too much trust in appearances'. It is a quote from the ancient Roman poet Virgil, a demonstration of Mary's Renaissance learning. At the centre grows an elaborate plant bursting with foliage and flowers.



**THE TROUT** in this image are swimming against the tide and all have to overcome the physical barrier of a bridge, much as Mary struggled against the many obstructions placed in her path. The fish may symbolise Christ and could be a reference to the queen's faith.

**THIS FEMALE DOLPHIN** is a copy from another Gessner illustration that showed it giving birth to a male offspring – perhaps used here as a reference to Mary giving birth to a male heir, James VI. The surviving panel is made from the top half of the female dolphin embroidery which has been cut in half and sewn to a bottom half showing another sea creature.

TROUT



SHE DOLPHIN



**Below:** The bottom of the original canker panel was cut off, probably in the 1600s.



SCOLOPENDER

**THIS SCOLOPENDER** sea monster is a copy from a Gessner illustration. The Swiss naturalist explained that it is a kind of marine centipede that propels itself through the water using its appendages like oars.

THORNBAC

**THE THORNBAC RAY**, named for the thorny spines on its back, was once a common fish in the North Sea. It is rarer today. Mary took Gessner's illustration as her model, although this does not really resemble an actual thornback ray. It is not known if the fish here had any symbolic significance.

THE CANKER

**THESE SWARMING CANKER WORMS** on a cabbage-like plant create a sense of infestation and deterioration. But these are much more than garden pests – they might represent degenerative disease, decay and Mary's unease about her own many ailments. They could also hint at her growing despair during her long captivity.