

The Besloten Hofje Shrine

Besloten Hofje is Dutch for “Dedicated Courtyard” and refers to all of the reliquary shrines in this style. I will refer to it as “shrine” throughout this paper.

The “who, what, where, and when” questions I will answer briefly because I wrote an entire paper on the subject which is here for your review. I will go into the “how” in detail.

Who= the Shrines were created by lay religious women known as beguines. The beguine movement was very popular in the Low Countries throughout the Medieval and Renaissance eras.

What= the Besloten Hofje were a type of reliquary shrine that was a devotional aid and focus. By meditating on the garden one could theoretically be transformed to the biblical paradise.

Where= there are 22 existing shrines: one is in Arras, France which was at one time part of the Low Countries, eleven are in Belgium, the remaining ten are in north-west Germany. Most are thought to have been created in Mechelen, Belgium.

When= the existing shrines all date from 1480 to 1550. There are similar shrines made after 1600 but there are fewer of them and they are not classified as Besloten Hofje.

I have visited and photographed all of the existing Besloten Hofje shrines. I find them very intriguing and felt a need to create one of my very own. Documenting the shrines was, in retrospect, the easiest part of this project. Figuring out how to recreate a shrine was a long and arduous project that took years!

How? This is the question. There is no written documentation as to how the shrines were created. There is one account of the creation of silk flower shrines in the Xanten, Germany city records from 1470 but the resulting shrine cannot be traced.

The art form used to create the flowers is called Passementerie and it is documented to have a guild by the mid-sixteenth century in France. Passementerie is the secret society of the craft guilds and even today there is very little written about the art form as a whole. It takes a seven year apprenticeship in any one of the sub-sections of the art to be a master in that subsection. Passementerie includes tassels, braided cording, and decorative buttons and can be seen on military uniforms and in high-end interior decorations to this day.

The codes of Passementerie require the use of silk, gold, and silver and “only the finest of materials. The art form is closely related to basket-weaving, lace-making, and netting like the type used in fishing. It is possible that the guild of Passementerie was created by combining several small but related art forms.

The shrines, like the one I created, are easy to document and each shrine is unique in its individual components. I took each individual element in my shrine from one of the twenty-two original shrines.

The following elements of the shrine are not fabric related:

The shrine box= is made of cherry wood which matches an existing piece of furniture and cherry is said to be the “fruit of paradise.” All of the original shrines are made of wood and it is possible that some are made of cherry wood but I don’t know for sure. The size of my shrine is average based on the existing shrines and has a compartment under it with a door. I can carve the door panel at a later time. The top is removable and it has a groove for a false back and for the glass.

The statues= I am carving one of the statues and my husband is carving the other one.

The *cedulae*= *Cedulae* are the name plates for relics. I did the calligraphy with a mix of modern and period inks that I had on hand using an iron nib.

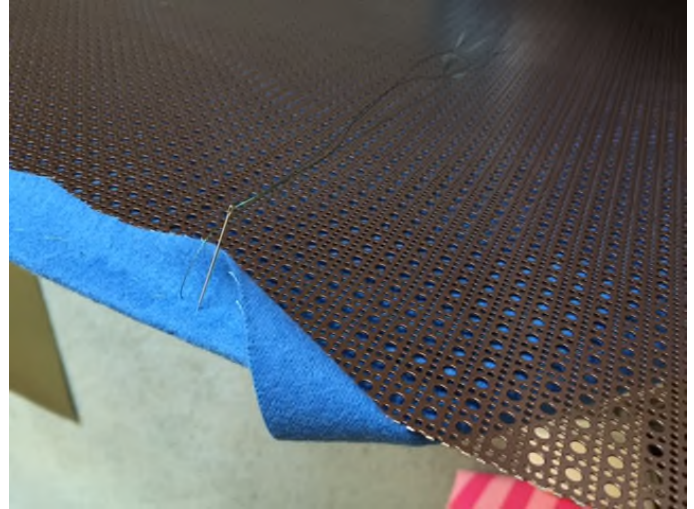
Relics, tokens, and other items= Most of these I did not make. I was gifted with actual relics from saints that were either alive or venerated in period. I have my dog’s ear which I stored in salt for two years and then stored in lavender for another year and can be found in the lilies. I collected a pilgrim badge in Xanten. There are several SCA coins and other tokens in the shrine and other small metal tokens purchased for this project. I made some of the glass beads but none of the metal charms.

Fence and gate= This fence is based on the fences of the right Predella in Kalkar. Two sticks of cherry wood with nails hammered in and reeds woven between the nails. The gate is made from a willow branch I found in my yard and sawed in half to construct the gate. I used rabbit skin glue on the gate.



Fabric Based Elements:

Screen= The shrine contains a false back to which I can attach all of the various elements. I used a metal screen purchased at Home Depot and cut it to size. I know that some of the period shrines contained false backs but since they have all undergone conservation efforts what you see is not always original to the shrine. The screen doesn't need reinforcement and it will greatly reduce the overall weight of the piece while holding everything in place. I covered it in silver cloth to reduce tarnish and then covered it in silk.



Pillows= I asked at least two curators what was in the pillows at the bottom of most of the shrines. I was told they contain secondary relics or "fibers." After they do some further analysis they will tell me what fibers exactly but in the meantime, I filled five cloth bags my mother had given me with various herbs and sewed them closed. I then put each in a silk pillow case, made from a blazer I chopped up. Each fiber (roses, lavender, corn silk, golden rod, and rosemary) has a different density to it so I could test what works best. "Ground plants" are set in place with an awl.



Logs or Tree Branches= Again I was unsure of what was actually in the logs. When I asked I was told they are actually meant to represent trees and these appear in several of the Mechelen shrines. I mulled it over for quite some time and then took several pieces of deer parchment and soaked them in the sink. I then rolled them and affixed with rubber bands to dry but then re-soaked and rolled in fabric because the rubber bands distorted the shape.



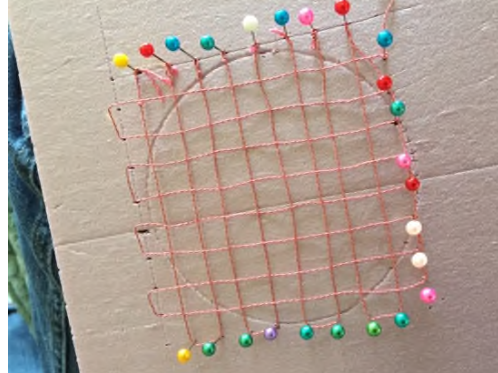
Deer parchment is too heavy for me to use in any other way and once dry, they hold their shape very well. I padded the dry rolls with silk fabric scrapes and then covered with silk and sewed them closed. I covered each one in a different, donated silk fabric. (I burn-tested all fabric that was not labeled and only used silk fabrics.) They are stitched into the classic tree design.



The Center Focal Piece= is based on several that are located in Kalkar. I took a piece of parchment, cut it to size and then soaked it in water to shape it in a slightly domed fashion. I waited until completely dry and then used gilder's malt to gild it at which point it totally reshaped itself so I pinned it all down and gilded it all over again.



Upon close examination of the Kalkar photos I determined that the central focal points were most likely serving as a monstrance – a place to put a communion host to display it. The netting is made by twisting, in equal parts, silk and wire. I set up a pin loom (much like the little looms kids make pot-holders on) and wove my netting. I think it would have looked nicer if it was more tightly woven and if it were laying over something that was totally flat.



I then made a little baggie which I lightly stuffed with lavender and a piece of parchment to keep it in shape. This didn't work at all so I slit open the bag and removed most of the lavender.



Then I stitched my focal into the gilded donut. Even with the pre-pinned holes it was nothing but painful and I had to use the forceps to get the needle through all the holes. Then I stitched it to the shrine backing.

Then I went back and outlined the inside edge with amethyst and brass beads, thinking that the holes would be easier to get through the second time around. I was wrong. This is where I was pretty sure I was going to force it to behave.



I decided at this point that I was not going to be stitching anything onto this parchment at all. I sewed carnelian beads to some appropriate trim and then outlined the golden donut, staying mostly off the parchment. Deciding that it needed something I stitched golden frieze over the top in a zigzag pattern. I'm mostly happy with the result but the parchment I used was too stiff and heavy for this particular project.