



Reliquary Flowers (and a bird)

STRING MANIPULATION
ADVANCED LEVEL

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A Brief History of Reliquary Flowers

A far more in-depth history of the flowers can be found in the bound research book that accompanies this entry. This is an outline for the sake of time.

The driving forces that led to the creation of the flowers were Beguines, a thriving practice in the production of silk goods, and a desire to have a focus for devote prayer sessions.

The earliest surviving flowers date to 1480 and the artform reached a peak around 1520. All extant examples were produced in the Low Countries (one currently resides in north-east France; the rest are split between Belgium and western Germany) where the largest concentration of Beguines was also located.

Beguines were religious women who banded together into orders but did not take vows as Nuns did. Nuns generally came from wealthy families and resided in convents where they had no need to work. Beguines frequently worked, lived in communities, and spent their available time in prayerful activities.¹

The silk industry was one of the few occupations that paid well and was dominated by women². A woman who worked in the silk industry would be considered respectable and would not need a husband or male family member to provide security or support. The average apprenticeship in silk exceeded seven years so it was unlikely that a woman would leave the industry if she married. The guild system in Germany did not favor women in any industry by this time, which could be a contributing factor for the existing German shrines being found only in the and only in churches and monasteries/convents.³

The shrines themselves are devotional focuses for prayer. They take the form of gardens, considered to be a representation of the everlasting heavenly reward. In Dutch they are called “Besloten Hofje” which translates to “Enclosed Garden” and is represented in many artforms though out the Middle Ages.⁴

The Besloten Hofje of this period (1480-1530) are created in the form of diorama depicting bible stories or contain statues of significant saints (to the group with the shrine) standing in a garden, behind a fence and gate. Later shrines (around 1600) have more of a curio cabinet feel and flowers of the 1700's are arranged as bouquets rather than as a part of a shrine.

¹ Pages 9-12 in *Besloten Hofje: Exploring the Low Countries' Flower Shrines*

² Specifically in France, but also in the Low Countries.

³ In addition, the Protestant Reformation hit the German countryside much harder in areas where we do not find shrines. See *ibid.* pages 17-22 for a more in-depth look.

⁴ In Latin “Hortus Conclusus”, which refers to both the Virgin Mary and the Heavenly Reward, as well as actual gardens.

- The earliest existing shrine is in Walsrode and dates to 1490, containing two statues. The earliest written account dates to 1470 in Xanten which is near Walsrode. The written description resembles the shrines in Kalkar.
- The early shrines have very natural looking flowers of silk. Around 1600 the flowers are mainly composed of metal threads. By the 1700's the flowers are made in silk again but have a very heavy, baroque look to them.
- The shrines are a Catholic thing – the Protestant Reformation probably destroyed many shrines that existed at the time. Production stopped almost entirely by 1560.

MATERIALS AND SKILLS

Generally, the materials required are limited to silk (both thread and cloth), wire (in various gauges), and vellum. Optional items include relics, cherry pits, and beads. As this entry is only about the flowers themselves, I will leave out the shrine enclosure and the statues, fence, gate, and pilgrim badges to fill the shrine.⁵

Items I used:

- ✓ Silk – I tried to match the colors with those seen in the original shrines. As the originals appear to have used scraps or leftovers from the silk production process that other members of the community participated in, I felt no need to investigate silk production of my own. (I was very careful with scraps and did most of my test work with less expensive materials.) The original flower creators were given a box of materials and returned completed flowers – this is what I attempted to stick with.
- ✓ Wire – Wire is wire and, while each metal or gauge handles a bit different there is not enough variant to have concern that I'm not using the "right one." I have in the past coiled my own spirals and made my own purl (silk covered wire.) I have since found suppliers that produce historically accurate purl or very tiny gold spirals and I now purchase and will use that as I'm able. (The purl is a very recent discovery and I'm looking forward to working with it.)
- ✓ Vellum – I have tested most types available and natural sheep works best. Historically, I can see where it is evident that at least some of the vellum had been written on and was possibly manuscript waste. I received some vellum from scribal waste and purchased other pieces. The pieces being used are all very tiny. Modern makers will frequently use vegetable parchment or double-sided sticky paper but I have no issues finding actual vellum which I use exclusively.

⁵ My shrine contains actual relics, actual pilgrim badges, things that are of significance to me and do not glaringly "look out of place" but do not all follow historical accuracy.

Skills used for this entry were vast! In one sense I'm not exaggerating – when I started this research there wasn't anyone making these flowers, there were no instructions, and I had only photographs to work from. I had to do experiments to see what worked and how I could achieve “the same look”. Since then I have met several curators who have worked with the original shrines and whom I have been able to exchange notes with. I have visited all the existing shrines, collected all the writings, taken scores of photos, and was delighted to find that I am a well-recognized name where the flowers are concerned. I was also gratified to learn that I was right about all my initial assumptions concerning the original construction methods and materials used.

The main physical skill required, aside from perfect eye sight, is the ability to do very even and detailed thread wrapping. Consistency is the key to lovely flower construction. I have also found that when constructing several flowers of the same type it is better to cut out all the petals at the same time and arrange them by size or shape, thereby making each flower balanced but unique. Even when using a pattern or template, at this size every variation makes a huge difference so taking the smallest petals for one flower and the largest for another, the differences don't stand out so much.

METHODS AND TOOLS

This section is a bit easier for me to deal with. For tools I used a needle (not necessary but easier to use one on the vellum petals,) scissors as my main cutting method, and my hands. I also designed and created a tool for fringe and pompoms out of a stick of wood but it would not surprise me to find that the tool already existed. I also have a small pliers and forceps so my fingers don't get cut up when I tighten wires.

Methods were all discovered by trial and error. In the end I found that what worked best was to suck the vellum⁶ a bit and then stick a needle in the point (corner, end) and wait until it was dry. Then I would tie a small piece of wire to the vellum and start wrapping the petal, being careful to untwist twisted silks or hold flat silks to be even and not overlap the previous wrap. When I reached the other end of the petal I would fasten the end of the silk (the wire and vellum were thoroughly encased in silk) and bend the petal so both pieces of wire met and could be twisted together. After finishing the required number of petals, I could assemble the flower from the middle outward.

Other flower types that did not contain vellum were made in a similar fashion and assembled in the same manner. Stitches were learned so that a picture of a historical flower and my latest creation could be seen side-by-side and no discernable differences noted. I then went back and created instructions for future classes. I randomly picked flowers from various shrines to recreate based on what appealed to my interests at the

⁶ Wet vellum is flexible and will accept a needle easily but wet vellum is not stiff enough to wrap. It must get wet enough to put a hole in but not so wet that it warps when dry.

time. (Meaning that the end goal was not to create a shrine of a very specific time-period but to create a shrine in the overall design type but personal to me.)

MAKING A BIRD

Like the goat I made two years ago, the bird was a new venture for me and follows the basic design of the birds I found in the historical shrines.

The difficult part was to figure out the body construction. With the goat I use a formed vellum base, wrapped in silk fabric and then sewed the fur bits onto the base. The bird however had way more “bits” to it than the goat did, and the goat fur could hide a host of issues which the bird feathers would not be able to do and it would need to be much lighter in weight. I started with the tail feathers and spent the time thinking about the rest of the construction.

After much trial and a few errors, I decided to use embroidery forms, usually used for making stumpwork objects. The forms are made of molded cotton and are typical of the ones used in period. The forms would give my bird the bulk it needed and not add extra weight. I covered a lemon form and added a wire beak and peridot eyes and I covered an orange form to use for the body and slid it onto the end wires from the tail feathers. As these were the most appropriate forms I had available I used them and then ordered some better ones for next time (just in case there is a next time.) Looking through the historical photos revealed that forms were most likely used in this period.

Most of the period birds did not have discernable wings but, never wanting to take the easy way out, I felt my bird needed wings. This does make the bird look a whole lot larger though! The wings were constructed by making three groups of three purl petals and then wiring the groups together and adding an additional purl petal to the top. To conserve on the amount of wire used, and make assembly easier, I constructed the groups in a line (think Christmas lights).

The body feathers were constructed in three groups of six purl petals which were wrapped into a skirt and then slid over the form - but then the whole bird fell apart! I removed the skirt (which crushed a petal) and rewired it so the extra wires could be trimmed. I then stretched it out a bit so it would fit over the form again. I then covered the wing wires and sewed them to the bird so they would stay up. At this point I could reattach the head and sew it into place. After mounting it to the display I decided it needed a more substantial beak and some feet – the feet are in addition to the mounting wire.

It looks very bird like (accomplished goal) and I’ve never used forms before so that was a new experience. Birds, I have decided, score very high on the difficulty meter though so I don’t think I’ll be making another one very soon.

WHAT I LEARNED ALONG THE WAY

This has been an ongoing, long-term, project that has occupied my creative energy for some years now. My next big project will be to polychrome the statues that my husband and I carved for the shrine but first I still need to make many more flowers and some more small animals.

There are no shortcuts for creating the flowers aside from purchasing pre-made purl. I try to be efficient with my time (cutting all petals first) and get materials that require less work (untwisted silk) but those were concepts I learned by doing. This is an incredibly meditative artform and it appears to fit right into the lifestyle of a religious person.

I was told at one time that there was a division of labor when creating a shrine; one person would design, several would produce, a few would assemble, others would install. Each job requires different skill sets and if I had to pick my favorite it would be the flower assembly because I like putting them together; I don't care so much for designing, construction is long and repetitive, and I agonize over installation trying to make sure it looks good from every angle.



LIST OF PRIMARY SOURCES

I have provided BALaT (balat.kikirpa.be) or Bildex (bildindex.de) index numbers as I was able though there were some not indexed in online searches. Silk Flowers comprise the following shrines:

1. Arras, France – Museum main hall. Believed created in Mecheln 1st half 16th c
2. Rheine, Germany – Convent Bentlage. Dated 1499. Large shrine with skulls.
3. Rheine, Germany – Convent Bentlage. Dated 1500. The second of two.
4. Antwerp, Belgium – Antwerp Museum, second floor. Brabant 1500 B183975
5. Kalkar, Germany – St. Nicolai Johannesaltar, 1500 6 shrines RBA609153-9
6. Xanten, Germany – Dom St. Viktor, 1505-1510
7. Walsrode, Germany – Walsrode Convent, chapel. 1490
8. Gheel, Belgium – St. Dimpna, side altar. Believed created in Mecheln 1st qtr 16th c
9. Herentals, Belgium – Beguinage Museum, entry hall. 1st qtr 16th c B155312
10. Sint Lenaards, Belgium – St. Lenards, chapel. 1st half 16th c A16797
11. Balen-Neet, Belgium – Balen Church, nave. 1491-1510 B194258
12. Mecheln, Belgium – Schepenhuis Museum contains the following shrines:
 - a. KN8404 Created in Mecheln 1st qtr 16th c
 - b. KN8402 Created in Mecheln 1st third 16th c
 - c. KN8407 Created in Brabant 1510
 - d. KN8410 Created in Mecheln 1510
 - e. KN8411 Created in Mecheln 1st qtr 16th c

Silk Flowers can also be found on the Ebstorf Cushions (1480) and several skull wraps.

LIST OF SECONDARY SOURCES

A full list of references can be found in the Besloten Hofje book. Everything written about the flowers specifically is primarily in German and not nearly as useful as standing in front of the flowers themselves. There is a good deal of recently published information on the Beguine movement and anything more recent than 2014 I am not familiar enough to recommend. I have listed some of the better books I have read.

Geary, Patrick J. *Furta Sacra; Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*, Princeton University Press, 1978.

Miller, Tanya Stabler. *The Beguines of Medieval Paris*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. (An in-depth look at the beguines and their connection with the silk industry.)

Simons, Walter. *Cities of Ladies; Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries 1200-1565*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Swan, Laura. *The Wisdom of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women's Movement*, BlueBridge Press, 2014.

0-8 points. Judging and scoring for Documentation is based on a graduated level of knowledge and discussion of the components of the item. Advanced level documentation should have a thorough discussion of the components of the item, explains the rationale behind methods, materials, skills and tools, provides illustrations (if available), references and notes, as well as any original research or experimentation. Any conscious compromises should be explained. A summary page is helpful if the documentation is exceptionally in-depth, and more detailed work can also be put in appendices. Verbal feedback during the judging, how well the entrant understands the period practice and process of the creation of their item beyond what is written, can enhance the Documentation score. Give score based on the following:

- Description and discussion of entry including the following: country of origin, period of origin, characteristics of style for that period.
- Thorough knowledge or discussion of materials and skills used to complete the project.
- Thorough knowledge or discussion of methods and tools used to complete the project.
- Research and reference: very complete sources and visual or descriptive references, includes a bibliography and cites sources in a standard format (endnotes, footnotes, parenthetical, MLA, etc.).

Authenticity

0-8 points. Judge this at the Advanced level, keeping in mind any deviations or substitutions from authentic period equivalents (reasonable substitutions for elements that are too toxic, too expensive or too rare) must be plausible and explained. Efforts to achieve a completely authentic item (except those items that are unsafe) will score best.

- Form/function—is it a period item and does it work in a period way (apparent knowledge or application of period practice).
- Methods of creation—appropriate to period or are consistent and give a period effect.
- Materials used—Ex., handmade or period style needles, handspun thread, period forms, etc.

- Design, style—period design or style or gives a period effect.

Complexity

1-5 points. Rank the ambition of the entry, not the workmanship, based on the following. Judge the entrant at the Advanced level, keeping in mind that not all period items are complex.

- Scope of endeavor (number of pieces, size of work in relation to amount of detail, etc.).
- Difficulty/variety of designs or patterns used.
- Difficulty/variety of techniques attempted-stitches, weave, braiding, etc.
- Difficulty/variety of media, materials, tools used-handspun, handmade are more difficult than commercial.
- Extent of original work or ideas.

Workmanship

1-5 points. Rank the quality of execution and success of the entry. Judge the entrant at the Advanced level, based on the following:

- Effective use of tools, methods, execution.
- Techniques, handling of materials, etc.-tension, uniformity, finishing.
- Design: period aesthetics, motifs, design-evenness, especially in geometric designs and repeating patterns (note: period sense of balance is not necessarily the same as modern).
- Form/Function: does it do what it should do and look as it should look?
- Period styling or personalization or special embellishment.

Overall Quality

1-4 points. Evaluate the work as a whole, rating the aesthetic effect and appeal beyond the mere technical proficiency. Consider how you react to the entry (intuitive response) and other items not previously addressed. This is the 'wow' factor; following are some examples to consider, but the category is not limited to these.

- Completely authentic from the ground up. -OR-
- Unique or outstanding display or attempt at period presentation. -OR-
- Logical creative endeavor within a period methodology (creativity/individuality). -OR-
- You want to take it home because it is really outstanding.