

17th Century Gaming Purses

Words and pictures by Wayne Robinson

Whilst sitting at the late OST, playing dominos last Saturday night, the odd assortment of boxes, pouches, pockets and grubby tissues people keep their gambling money in reminded me to dig out some photos of a couple of gaming purses we saw in Blighty. I have included the photos below, along with the corresponding museum captions and some Internet shots from the V&A. The decision that these are French was made in 1856 by someone at the V&A mainly based on the *fleur de lis* decoration on a number, but by no means all of them¹. Of course, this is totally inconsistent with the use of this design as decoration on a number of leather bottles of documented English construction, some of which are in the V&A collection.

This style of purse seems to have a fairly simple pattern, even more so if you want to ignore the embroidery as in one of the V&A examples below, although there needs to be some sort of reinforcing to help keep the sides vertical when in use. Two circles, one of really top-shelf cloth and one of fine lining material are cut out and a flat circle of another heavier material (leather?) is stitched in the centre of the two layers to form a heavy base. The outer edge is also seamed, eyelets are much like eyelets on doublets; the more holes, the neater and better the finished purse will be. Tie with one or more drawstrings, decorate to taste.

Dover Museum



French Gambling purse c. 1630.

Photo: W Robinson

¹ Thanks to Susan North from the V&A for confirmation of this point.

This gambling or gaming purse would have been used to contain coins or counters during gambling. On the base is an embroidered fleur de lis, the emblem of France.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Photo: W Robinson

Museum caption:

Gaming or gambling with cards was a popular 17th-century pastime. A gentleman or lady who did not participate in games such as “Quadrille” or “Basset” would have been considered “low-bred and hardly fit for conversation” according to *The Compleat Gamester*, published in 1674.

Typically, a gaming purse had a flat, circular base, with sides gathered on a drawstring.

Velvet, trimmed with copper-gilt thread.

Probably made in France 1660-1700.

Museum no. 2100-1899.

The photo above is fairly crappy due to the low light levels used to help conserve the items in the museum. A decent photo of this purse is on the V and A commercial images website at <http://www.vandaimages.com/results.asp?image=PC066006-01&wwwflag=1&imagepos=32>

References

Dover Museum, <http://www.dover.gov.uk/museum/>

Kipper, N., *The Salacious Historian's Lair*,

<http://www.kipar.org/salacious-historian/index.html>

Victoria and Albert Museum, <http://www.vam.ac.uk>