

THE VEGLIA ALTAR FRONTAL: NOTES ON ITS ACQUISITION AND SUBSEQUENT CONSERVATION

Silvija Banić

S. Banić
Victoria and Albert Museum
Furniture, Textiles and Fashion Department
Cromwell Road, UK-SW7 2RL London
E-mail: s.banic@vam.ac.uk

10.1484/M.DEM-EB.5.121647

The altar frontal made about 1330 after the design by Paolo Veneziano (active 1333-58) is by far the most monumental of all extant embroideries worked in Venetian medieval workshops. Commissioned for the Cathedral in Krk (Veglia in Italian), a town on the island of the same name in the Kvarner (Quarnero) Bay, it remained in the Cathedral's sacristy until about 1930. Around that year and under still unclear circumstances it was purchased by Otto Bernheimer (1877-1960), who was head of one of Europe's major art-dealing companies at the time. The frontal remained in Germany until July 1964 when it was sent to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Since nothing has been written on why the frontal became part of one of the world's most renowned textile collections, this article primarily focuses on the intriguing story of its acquisition, and it also considers its conservation, undertaken soon after it was accessioned.

Key words: *the Veglia Altar Frontal, Victoria and Albert Museum, George Wingfield Digby, Donald King, Ludwig Otto Bernheimer, Otto Bernheimer, Sir George Trenchard Cox*

INTRODUCTION

The embroidered antependium commissioned about 1330 for the Cathedral in Krk (Veglia), today known as the Veglia Altar Frontal, is the most important surviving example of *opus venetum* (Venetian work). As such, it is familiar to scholars, having been repeatedly discussed in publications on both medieval embroidery and the *œuvre* of Paolo Veneziano (active 1333-58), after whose design it was worked.¹ This essay shall thus not embark yet again on presenting its well-established provenance

¹T. G. JACKSON, *Dalmatia, the Quarnero and Istria with Cettigne in Montenegro and the Island of Grado*, Volume 3, Oxford, 1887, pp. 150-151; D. KNIEWALD, Antependij i pala stolne crkve u Krku, *Godišnjak Sveučilišta Kraljevine Jugoslavije u Zagrebu za školske godine 1924/25-1928/29*, Zagreb, 1929, pp. 49-55; B. KURTH, Ein gesticktes venezianisches Antependium des 14. Jahrhunderts, *Belvedere*, 18, 1931, pp. 47-48; R. PALLUCCHINI, *La pittura veneziana del Trecento*, Venezia - Roma, 1964, pp. 27-28; D. KING, *A Venetian Embroidered Altar Frontal*, in *Victoria and Albert Museum Bulletin*, 1/4, October 1965, pp. 14-25; M. MURARO, *Paolo da Venezia*, Milano, 1969, pp. 141-142; B. DEGENHART – A. SCHMIDT, *Corpus der italiensichen Zeichnungen 1300-1450. Vol. II. Venedig 1300-1400. Addenda zu Süd-und Mittelitalien*, Berlin, 1980, pp. 89-91; P. JOHNSTONE, *High Fashion in the Church. The Place of Church Vestments in the History of Art from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century*, London, 2002, pp. 51, 53; L. MONNAS, *Merchants, Princes and Painters. Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings 1300-1550*, London, 2008, p. 42; R. DUIJS, *Gold Brocade and Renaissance Painting: A Study in Material Culture*, London, 2008, p. 393; S. BANIC, Zadarski gotički vezeni antependij u Budimpešti, *Ars Adriatica*, 4, Zadar, 2014, pp. 79, 90, note 10; E. COZZI, Paolo Veneziano e bottega: il polittico di Santa Lucia e gli antependia per l'isola di Veglia, *Arte in Friuli Arte in Trieste (AFAT)*, 35, 2016, pp. 245, 264-265; V. BARADEL, Diramazioni adriatiche di botteghe veneziane. L'isola di Veglia (Krk), da Paolo Veneziano a Jacobello del Fiore, in: *La Serenissima via mare. Arte e cultura tra Venezia e il Quarnaro*, (eds.) Valentina Baradel, Cristina Guarnieri, Padova, 2019, pp. 70-72, figs. 14-16.

nor on the stylistic similarities shared with the polyptychs painted by the same master. Nonetheless, its earliest detailed description in the records of the Victoria and Albert Museum (hereafter V&A), which is the hitherto unpublished acquisition proposal written on July 13th 1964 by Donald King, is useful for setting the scene:

14th century embroidered altar frontal offered for sale by Bernheimer, Munich

This large altar frontal (3ft. 4ins. X 9ft.) is embroidered in gold thread, with details in coloured silk, on a red silk background. In the centre is the Coronation of the Virgin, with twelve angels, and on either side, beneath Gothic arches, SS. Querinus, Peter, John the Evangelist, John the Baptist, Paul and Gaudentius. A small kneeling bishop in the central scene is no doubt the donor of the work.

*The frontal, though not well known, has formed the subject of two publications (Karl Kniewald, in *Universitätsjahrbuch in Agram 1924/5-1928/9*; Betty Kurth, in *Belvedere*, 1931). It was sold about 1930 from the 12th century cathedral of Krk, formerly Veglia, near the Italian-Yugoslav frontier, and the iconography suggests that it was made for the high altar there. The church was dedicated to the Virgin and St. Querinus; St. Gaudentius was the patron saint of Cherso,² a neighbouring place.*

The design of the frontal is a fine example of the mixed Byzantine-Gothic style which was current in Venetian painting during the first half of the 14th century. It is certainly the work of a distinguished painter, very probably Paolo Veneziano. The central scene closely resembles his painting of the Coronation of the Virgin, dated 1324, in the National Gallery, Washington, and his undated paintings of the same subject in the Brera, Milan; it apparently belongs to his earlier, more Byzantine period, about 1315-40. If St. John the Baptist in the frontal may be regarded as the patron saint of the episcopal donor who kneels at his feet, then the dating may be narrowed a little further; the only bishop of Veglia who bore the name of John at the relevant period was Bonioannes, whose episcopate fell between the years 1315 and 1330.³

The embroidery, like the design, was evidently produced in a Venetian workshop. It was natural for a bishop of Veglia to commission such work in Venice, about 150 miles distant by sea, the nearest city possessing embroidery workshops of international repute. In the 13th and 14th centuries Venetian workshops supplied embroideries to the Papal court at Rome and at Avignon and one example of their work is recorded as far away as St. Paul's in London. The Veglia altar frontal is of particular interest as the sole surviving work, as far as is known, of this notable school of medieval embroidery.

The frontal is now much worn and a good deal of detail has been lost, but this is by no means unusual in embroidery of the 14th century; fortunately, there has been no disfiguring restoration and the patches of later

² In the following months Donald King conducted a more in-depth research, resulting in the amended and more detailed iconographical analysis, as evident from the registered description of the frontal; *In the centre the Coronation of the Virgin. Christ and the Virgin are seated on a throne covered by a hanging of light green patterned in gold which is held up behind them by two angels. On the throne is a gold cushion. Christ is crowned and holds up a sceptre in his left hand. With his right he places on the Virgin's head another crown. The Virgin's hands are in an attitude of prayer. Above the figures is a light blue starry vault and behind this are seen the heads of rows of angels, all with fair curly hair. Beneath Gothic arches to the left of the central group are the standing figures of St Querinus (S. QVERINUS), St Peter (S. PETRVS) and St John the Evangelist (S. IOHS EVGS.), while to the right are St John the Baptist (S. IOHS BAT), St Paul (S. PAVLVS) and St Gaudentius (S. GAVDENOI). St Querinus and St Gaudentius are vested as bishops with chasuble, mitre and crosier. St Peter holds a key, with a loop for suspension and St Paul holds a sword and a book. St John the Evangelist points to a book bearing the words IN P(R)INC(I)PIO ER(AT) VER(BUM), while St John te Baptist points towards Christ and holds a scroll inscribed ECCE AGNVS DEI ECCE QVI TOLIS PECATA MUNDI. (...) St Querinus, Bishop of Siscia (Sisak) in Croatia, martyred under Diocletian, is the patron saint of Veglia; St Gaudentius is the patron saint of neighbouring Ossero (Osor), where he was bishop, 1030-42. The frontal was mentioned specifically in a Cathedral inventory of 1772: 'Un antependio coll impronta degli apostoli di racamo rosso. Valore d'estimo fior. 30' (...). The Registered Description, files kept in the Furniture, Textiles and Fashion (FTF) Department, V&A South Kensington.*

³ More attention to the figure and identity of the donor was given in the Registered Description: *To the right of the central group, at the foot of the throne, kneels a small figure vested in chasuble and mitre, doubtless representing the bishop for whom the frontal was made. (...) It was presumably commissioned by a Bishop of Veglia, who is represented on the frontal as donor, probably Bishop Bonichannes (in office 1326).*

embroidery which have been applied here and there can easily be removed. Seen in an appropriate setting in the Italian Gothic gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the frontal, with its monumental figures and its powerful harmony of red and gold, still makes a profound impression as a splendid and precious work of art.

The gold-embroidered altar frontals of the 14th century, made, when the craft of embroidery was at its highest development, to occupy the central position in the greatest churches, were among the most sumptuous of all medieval church furnishings. Only about a dozen still exist, in various cathedrals and museums on the continent.⁴ The Veglia frontal is the first which has ever been offered to the Victoria and Albert Museum and it is exceedingly unlikely that such an opportunity will recur. On all counts – as an important design attributable to Paolo Veneziano, as the unique specimen of Venetian medieval embroidery, as a magnificent piece of medieval church furniture, and as a work of art of very high quality – it seems a most desirable acquisition for the Museum.⁵

It is still unclear what led to the altar frontal's departure from Krk, which surely remains one of the greatest losses of Croatian heritage. The names of the clergymen in Krk who managed the sale remain unknown. However, the provenance information in Donald King's acquisition proposal suggests it is likely that the Krk Bishopric sold it about 1930. The bishop to approve the sale could, therefore, only have been Mgr Josip Srebrnić (1876 – 1966), who headed the diocese between 1923 and 1966. Further documentation, published here for the first time, primarily comprises the correspondence dating between March 1964 and January 1965. The documents reveal that, apart from the aforementioned Donald King (1920-1998), the principal protagonists of the acquisition were George Wingfield Digby (Fig. 1) and Ludwig Otto Bernheimer. George Wingfield Digby (1911-1989), above all a specialist in medieval and Renaissance tapestry, came to the Textiles Department of the V&A in 1934. He was Keeper of Textiles from 1947 until his retirement in 1972.⁶ Donald King, at this time the Deputy Keeper and curator of textiles, is considered as the founding father of textile studies in England, his true vocation being the study of medieval textiles. During World War II he initially served with the Royal Air Force (RAF) as a mechanic, but due to his proficiency in French, German and Latin was transferred to the Intelligence Service of the Air Ministry, later becoming one of the so-called 'Monuments Men'. He joined the Textiles Department in 1948, soon after having gained a degree in the History of Art at the Courtauld Institute. On the retirement



Fig. 1. George Wingfield Digby, Keeper of the Department of Textiles in the Victoria and Albert Museum, in 1966.
Source: A. BURTON, 1999, p. 218

⁴ A statement also elaborated in the Registered Description; *The frontal is related to other embroideries of the period with the same subject, in particular to a frontal of 1325 from the Duomo of Pisa, a frontal of 1336 from S. Maria Novella in Florence, and a Bohemian frontal of about 1360 from the Marienkirche in Pirna; but also to a Lower-Saxon frontal of the 13th century at Halberstadt Cathedral, a Swedish frontal of about 1300 from Eskilstuna Church and a Rhineland frontal of the later 14th century at Kloster Kamp.*

⁵ V&A Archive, Registered File No. 64/838. The entire correspondence, both external and internal, transcribed in the paper, is the content of this file. The documents are unnumbered and mostly filed chronologically.

⁶ A. BURTON, *Vision & Accident. The Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London, 1999, pp. 181, 218.

of George Wingfield Digby, King became Keeper of Textiles, a post which he held until his retirement in 1980.⁷ Ludwig Otto Bernheimer (1907-1970) was the son of Otto Bernheimer (1877-1960), who had bought the altar frontal from the diocese about 1930. At the time of the purchase, Otto was head of *L. Bernheimer*, one of Europe's major art-dealing companies, founded in Munich in 1864 by his father Lehmann Bernheimer (1841-1918). How the contact between Otto Bernheimer and the clergy in Krk was established is still shrouded in mystery. However, it is known that – after taking over the company on his father's death – Otto travelled to many European countries in search of fine art, often in the company of his brothers Max and Ernst. It is therefore possible that about 1930, in search of artworks to purchase, he travelled along the Adriatic coast and reached Krk by chance. On the other hand, Krk might have been his intended destination, chosen specifically upon having seen Dragutin Kniewald's paper on the altar frontal published in 1929. One way or another, Otto Bernheimer clinched the deal with the Bishopric, but did not succeed in reselling the altar frontal during his lifetime. However, it is not at all difficult to comprehend that the frontal remained unsold, especially considering the troublesome times before and during the WWII. Since they were ethnically Jewish, the years of ordeal for the Bernheimer family started with the *Kristallnacht* in 1938, when the windows of their shop were smashed and Otto imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp, together with his sons Ludwig Otto and Kurt Otto. They managed to get released and the family emigrated to Venezuela. Otto returned to Munich in 1945, when he commenced with repairing the war-damaged commercial building and fighting for the restitution of the confiscated family property - his company's artworks included. He was able to resume his business in 1948, now with a focus on textiles and furnishings.⁸ Hence, the Bernheimers have not been in possession of the frontal for about ten years, and it is somewhat of a miracle that it did not perish during the tumultuous times of conflict. Therefore, it was Otto's son Ludwig Otto Bernheimer (hereafter Ludwig Bernheimer) who negotiated its sale to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1964. The documentation put forward in this essay aims to show how the sale was conducted. Moreover, new visual and material analysis of the altar frontal in the second section shall provide additional insights on the piece.

'A MOST DESIRABLE ACQUISITION': IDENTIFICATION AND NEGOTIATION WITH THE DEALER

The V&A's policy has always been to document meticulously each step of the acquisition procedure, whether the object is a purchase, donation or bequest. Such records include not only information on the object's provenance but also the paperwork recording the process of justification and acquisition; they are gathered together in the relevant Registered File, which is housed in the Museum Archive. The earliest document in the Veglia Altar Frontal Registered File dates from March 16th 1964, and is a letter sent from Ludwig Bernheimer to George Wingfield Digby. The letter reveals that the latter had been in Munich the previous day, when he had visited the *L. Bernheimer* gallery. However, the reason for his going to the art dealer's premises had nothing to do with the altar frontal. Indeed, he was keen to view a pair of 17th-century French tapestries, likely commissioned by Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-83), one of which he considered a potential acquisition. Bernheimer wrote: *Referring to your favoured visit to our firm, we have pleasure in enclosing – according to your wish – a photograph of one of the two 'portières de la gloire' with the Colbert coat-of-arms. As we told you, we should have to ask a price of DM 30.000 for each of these tapestries. Whilst hoping to have a possibility in the future of showing you our textile collection in a more detailed way, we are, Dear Sir, yours truly (...).*⁹

The reply from George Wingfield Digby, a week later, further reveals that their meeting in Munich was short and predominantly focused on the tapestries, which is not surprising, because Wingfield

⁷ N. ROTHSTEIN, Donald King, an Appreciation, in: *Textile History*, 20:2, 1989, pp. 115.

⁸ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_Bernheimer [accessed on the 14th of February 2020].

⁹ All typewritten but hand-signed *L. Bernheimer*, as is the case with all his letters in the file.

Digby was an eminent tapestry scholar: *It was a great pleasure to meet you and to visit your magnificent galleries when I was in Munich; I only wish I had been able to put aside a little more time. Thank you very much for having the photograph of a Portière with the arms of Colbert sent to me. The two Portière are very fine and I admire them very much. I am having to think about the arrangement of new galleries which was bearing on our possible acquisition of one of them. May I write to you again when we are able to make up our minds? I am also going into the literature on another of the tapestries I saw with you last week.*¹⁰

On April 10th, George Wingfield Digby wrote again to Ludwig Bernheimer. From what can be read between the lines, he had given up entirely on pursuing one of the door-hangings. Instead, he decided to make further enquiries about a 16th-century Tournai tapestry and ‘the 14th century Venetian embroidered antependium’. Albeit short, this letter is one of the most interesting documents in the V&A acquisition file, because it reveals that Wingfield Digby noticed the frontal first, rather than Donald King, as one could wrongly presume.¹¹ Even though tapestries were one of his principal interests in which he had great expertise, he did not fail to recognise the altar frontal as an object of value during his short visit to the Bernheimer gallery. On his return to London, he must have mentioned it to Donald King, who had staged the *Opus Anglicanum* exhibition at the V&A the previous year and was extensively familiar with medieval embroidery. After their conversation Wingfield Digby decided to enquire further: *I am afraid we have not yet come to a decision about the two portieres with Colber’s [sic] Arms, but in the meantime I would very much like to ask you about two other things I saw when I was with you. I have looked up the literature on the big early 16th century Tournai tapestry with the curious subject from the Charlemagne epics, the Story of the ‘Viateur’ (Hamburg Exhibition, 1953, No. 16). I would be interested to know what you are asking for this tapestry. The second piece is the 14th century Venetian embroidered antependium which came from the Cathedral of Veglia in the island of Quarnero in Istria. We would be interested to hear what you are asking for this splendid embroidery.*¹²

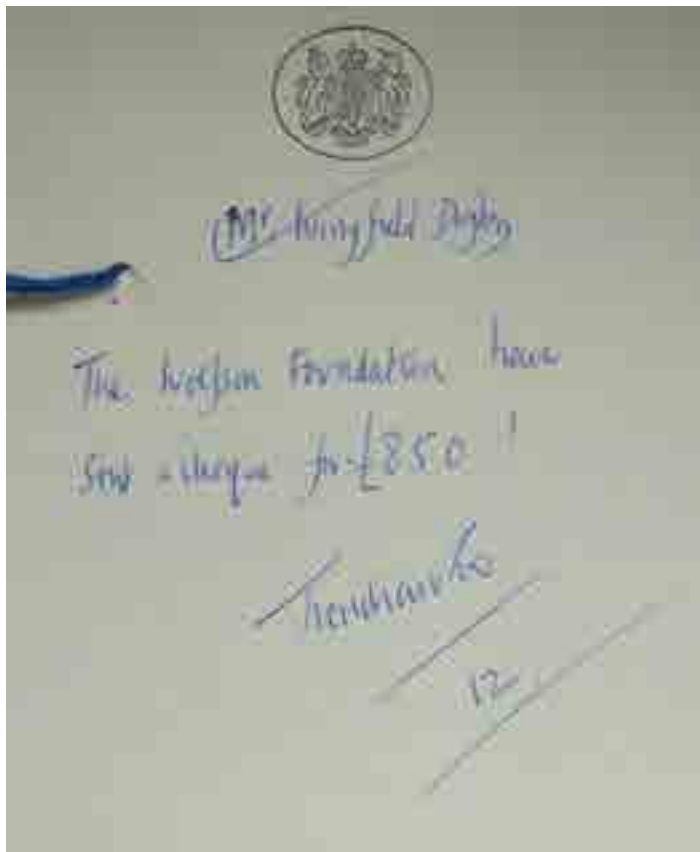


Fig. 2. Note from Sir George Trentham Cox, at the time Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, to George Wingfield Digby, informing him that the fundraising campaign for the altar frontal has been successfully completed. Probably 14 December 1964. V&A Archive, Registered File No. 64/838

¹⁰ The letter ends with *I hope you enjoyed some of the Elizabethan Embroideries at the Nationalmuseum. Yours sincerely, G. F. Wingfield Digby, Keeper of Textiles* [all typewritten].

¹¹ In this context, it is worth stressing how Natalie Rothstein reflected on this acquisition: *He [Donald King] acquired the Venetian embroidered altar frontal designed by the workshop of Paolo Veneziano (T.I-1965) displayed in gallery 22 and wrote the definitive article upon it in the first volume of the Bulletin of the V&A in 1965. N. ROTHSTEIN, op. cit (n. 7), p. 116.*

¹² Ended with *Yours sincerely, G. F. Wingfield Digby, Keeper, Department of Textiles* [all typewritten].

It did not take long for Ludwig Bernheimer to answer disclosing his asking prices for both the tapestry and the altar frontal. On receiving the letter, George Wingfield Digby wrote '£10-11,000'¹³ in the margin, his conversion of the price from German currency. He did not do the same for the price of the tapestry, an indication that he had made the decision not to consider acquiring it but to concentrate solely on the altar frontal. Moreover, not surprisingly, Ludwig Bernheimer was enthusiastic about having received an enquiry for the altar frontal: first, because it had spent decades in the family's possession; and second, because selling it was most likely quite challenging due to the high figure on its price tag. In an effort to make it even more attractive to the Keeper of Textiles at the V&A, he did not miss out on the opportunity to stress that the piece had been published twice: *Thank you ever so much for your two letters of March 23rd and April 10th. In reply to the latter I may inform you that we would be ready to sell the 'Viateur' tapestry at a price of DM 100.000, whereas the price for the fine Venetian antependium would amount to DM 120.000. As regards this latter piece, I may mention that there are existing [sic] two publications on it – one by Betty Kurth and one by Karl [sic] Kniewald. We could make copies of these publications in case you would like to get them.*¹⁴

It was only six days after Ludwig Bernheimer wrote the letter that Donald King put together his opinion on the altar frontal's significance and value, his conclusions based on Betty Kurth's paper, which he obviously consulted. On April 20th he addressed this internal document to George Wingfield Digby, reflecting on the asking price and suggesting how to proceed:

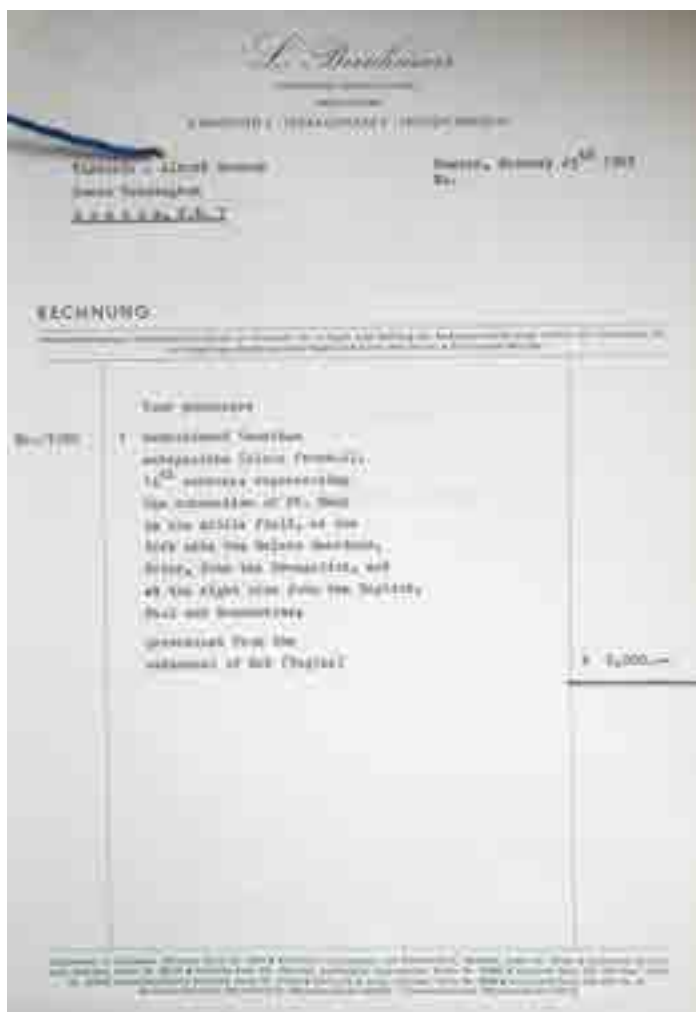


Fig. 3. Receipt for the payment for the Veglia altar frontal, L. Bernheimer, Munich, 25 January 1965. V&A Archive, Registered File No. 64/838

¹³ According to the historical inflation rates calculator, £11,000 in 1964 is equivalent to about £215,000 today. However, since calculations based on the retail price index are not completely appropriate, comparisons should rather be based on average earnings. To provide the historical context that relates to purchasing power in the mid-1960s, it is worth noting that the wage of a skilled tradesman at the time would require slightly over 20 years to earn that amount (source: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter>). Therefore, the labour value of £11,000 in 1964 corresponds to about £410,000 today (source: <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/ukcompare/>).

¹⁴ The letter, the same as most others, opens with *Dear Mr. Digby*. It ends with *May I avail myself of this opportunity to tell you how much I enjoyed seeing the exhibition of Elisabethan Embroideries at the Nationalmuseum. It is, indeed, an exhibition of highest standard and I was enthusiastic about the excellent quality of every single specimen. Would that these beautiful textiles remained here permanently!* Yours sincerely, Ludwig Bernheimer [all typewritten but hand-signed].

Bernheimer altar frontal

The price asked – between £10,000 and £11,000 – for this splendid and very large (about 3'4" x 12'6") early 14th century embroidered altar frontal seems modest when compared with £33,000 for the Butler-Bowdon cope ten years ago, or with current prices for 18th century furniture and silver.

Altar frontals embroidered in silk and gold thread were among the most important and spectacular of medieval church furnishings. Those of the early 14th century – artistically the finest – are extremely rare. The half-dozen or so extant examples are all, except the Bernheimer piece, in cathedrals or ancient municipal collections on the continent; as far as I know, no other example has ever been offered on the open market or is likely to be offered in the future. The Bernheimer frontal, made for the cathedral of Krk (Veglia) in Yugoslavia, is Venetian work. Indeed it seems to be the only known specimen of the Venetian school of embroidery, which was internationally reputed in the 13th and 14th century; examples were recorded at St Paul's, London, in 1245 and 1295, in the collections of the Holy See at Rome in 1295 and at Avignon in 1343, and at St Peter's, Rome, in 1361. The pictorial style of the frontal is the hybrid Byzantine-Gothic of the Venetian Trecento. Betty Kurth made a comparison with a painting by Paolo Veneziano (active 1324-62), which seems reasonable. Mr Pope-Hennessy may have something to say on the attribution; I fancy he owns a picture by that painter.

As the sole extant example of an important school of medieval embroidery and a magnificent specimen of an extremely rare and splendid type of ecclesiastical furnishing, this altar frontal strikes me as a most desirable acquisition for the V. & A., where, apart from its intrinsic merit, it would form a most interesting complement to the existing collection of English and other embroidery of the 14th century. I would suggest that we should accept Mr. Bernheimer's offer of copies of the two articles dealing with the frontal, and also ask for photographs of it, to enable us to consider the matter further.¹⁵

The document is of interest because it shows his process of judging the piece and his frame of reference. Donald King puts the altar frontal in the context of the acquisition of the Butler-Bowdon Cope (V&A T.36-1955), which was purchased for about three times the price.¹⁶ Furthermore, he suggests discussing the potential acquisition with Sir John Pope-Hennessy, a colleague curator in the Department of Sculpture, which demonstrates the influence and reputation enjoyed by Pope-Hennessy within the Museum.¹⁷ Now fully confident in his judgment that the acquisition of the altar frontal deserved to be considered with the utmost attention, George Wingfield Digby wrote to Ludwig Bernheimer the following day, making clear that the interest was genuine. Given that Betty Kurth's paper was illustrated in black and white, he followed Donald King's advice and asked for colour photographs of the altar frontal: *We are definitely interested in the Venetian embroidered antependium. We have look up Betty Kurth's article in Belvedere but do not know the one by Karl Kniewald, and would be very grateful for a copy of this, or at least a reference. I would also be very grateful to have some good photographs of the antependium so that we can come to a decision about its possible purchase. The illustrations in Belvedere seem to me to make it look in worse condition than I remember it.*¹⁸

¹⁵ All typewritten apart from the hand-written initials *DK* at the bottom.

¹⁶ The amount was raised with assistance from the Art Fund, the Pilgrim Trust, the Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors, the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, the Worshipful Company of Mercers, the Worshipful Company of Broderers, the Worshipful Company of Drapers, the Worshipful Company of Weavers and the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers. For details and illustrations, see: *English Medieval Embroidery: Opus Anglicanum*, (ed.) Clare Browne, Glyn Davies, Michael A. Michael, with the assistance of Michaela Zöschg, London, 2016, pp. 213-216, with previously published relevant literature cited here.

¹⁷ Sir John Pope-Hennessy (1913-1994) joined the Victoria and Albert Museum just before the WWII. At the time he worked in the Department of Engraving, Illustration and Design, but had to break off his career for war service. As soon as the war ended, he agreed to return to the Museum on condition that he is appointed to the Department of Sculpture. He served as the Museum's director between 1967 and 1973. A. BURTON, *op. cit.* (n. 6), p. 215.

¹⁸ The letter opens with *Dear Dr. Bernheimer, Thank you very much for your letter of 14th April* and is concluded with *Thank you very much for what you said about the Elizabethan Embroidery Exhibition; I am so glad you enjoyed it and found it of interest. Yours sincerely, G.F.Wingfield Digby, Keeper, Department of Textiles* [all typewritten].



Fig. 4. Photograph documenting the condition of the Veglia altar frontal (V&A T.1-1965) at the time it was acquired. Highlighted are the patches partially or completely removed in 1965.
V&A Furniture, Textiles and Fashion Department files

The post was travelling fast from London to Munich and the following letter from Ludwig Bernheimer was written only two days later (on April 23rd): *Thank you very much for your information regarding the Venetian antependium. I was pleased to learn that you are interested in this fine embroidery. According to your wish I, herewith, enclose 2 coloured photographs of the piece and, besides, a copy of Karl Kniewald's article. There was further the enclosed translation of Betty Kurth's article at hand which might likewise be useful to you.*¹⁹ His swiftness in replying in itself testifies to how thrilled he was with this unexpected development and how eager he was to make the sale. As stated in the letter, he sent two colour photographs of the altar frontal, the first an overall shot and the second a detail of the centre section.²⁰ The stamp on the reverse reads *Foto R. Nohr Munchen 23 Wilhelmstrase 28*. The importance of the photographs lies in the fact that there are no others in colour that document the condition of the altar frontal before its conservation in 1965 (Fig. 4).

George Wingfield Digby acknowledged the reception of the photographs in his letter of 1st May. Evidently, the Department had concluded that Donald King needed to view the altar frontal, and the

¹⁹ The letter ends with *Whilst seeing forward to your further information, I remain, most sincerely, Ludwig Bernheimer* [signed by hand].

²⁰ The photographs are today kept apart from the Registered File, due to their size. They are stored together with other textile-related research photographic material in the Furniture, Textiles and Fashion Department.



Fig. 5a. – 5b. Embroidered orphrey (detail; on the left) and hood (above) of two copes. Probably Venice, second half of the 16th century. Šibenik, the convent of St Francis

necessary arrangements were now being made: *Thank you very much for sending me the two big coloured photographs of the Venetian altar frontal, and also the article. My colleague Donald King will be calling at Munich on May 31st-June 1st, on his way back from the Byzantine Exhibition at Athens, and will come and see the altar frontal, if you will be so good as to let him see it. He is my colleague in this Department, and a specialist on medieval work, and I very much value his opinion.*²¹

Everything went as planned and Donald King visited *L. Bernheimer* in early June. However, he returned to London having ascertained that the altar frontal's condition did not merit the asking price. In his next letter to Munich, dated 10th June, George Wingfield Digby raised this issue proceeding with caution by making an offer significantly lower than what Ludwig Bernheimer was asking. Furthermore, he enquired about the possibility of the altar frontal being sent to London, so that the Director of the V&A, Sir George Trenchard Cox,²² could see it: *My colleague, Donald King, called to see the Venetian 14th century embroidered altar frontal from the Veglia cathedral last week, as doubtless you will have heard.*

²¹ Closing: *With kind regards, Yours sincerely, G. F. Wingfield Digby, Keeper, Department of Textiles* [all typewritten].

²² Sir George Trenchard Cox (1905–1995) was appointed to the directorship in 1956 and remained in post until his early, health-provoked retirement in 1966. It was during his tenure, in 1963, that the Museum put on the *Opus Anglicanum* exhibition - Donald King's principal achievement. Trenchard Cox's memory is still revered in the V&A because of his high appreciation of conservators and care for the staff in general. Amongst other, he had become renowned for having memorised - within weeks of his arrival - not only the names of all staff members but even the names of the cleaning ladies' husbands. A. BURTON, *op. cit.* (n. 6), pp. 211-215.



Fig. 6. Cross-shaped embroidered orphrey on the back of a chasuble. Probably Venice, second half of the 16th century. The church of St Nicholas in Komiža on the island of Vis



Fig. 7. Cross-shaped embroidered orphrey on the back of a chasuble. Probably Venice, second half of the 16th century. The Cathedral in Gambarare (Veneto region)

We feel that this altar frontal has very great quality and would be fitting acquisition for our Museum, but we are somewhat concerned about its rather worn and frayed condition. In view of this, I am wondering whether you would consider a rather more moderate price than DM 120,000 which you name in your letter of April 14th? If we could think in terms of a price between £6,500 - £7,000 I think the Director would be able to find the necessary funds for the purchase. If you felt able to meet us to some extent in this matter, would it be possible for you to send the antependium here, so that the Director of the Museum can see it and we can make a careful decision on the matter. We would have to try to get help with the payment from one of the Funds which supports us in such cases.²³

Nine days later, Ludwig Bernheimer wrote to London. This time the tone of his letter was less enthusiastic. He dismissed the remarks on the altar frontal's condition as irrelevant. However, he must have felt that Wingfield Digby's arguments were legitimate and that the sale could be close to falling through. Thus, he expressed willingness to send the altar frontal to London, while refusing to accept the amount offered by George Wingfield Digby and responding with a counter proposal. The arguments he made in defence of the price are especially interesting from the point of view of provenance: he clearly stated that his father had bought the altar frontal directly from the Bishopric,

²³ Closing: *With kind regards, Yours sincerely, G. F. Wingfield Digby, Keeper, Department of Textiles* [all typewritten].



Fig. 8. Two fragments of an orphrey stitched together, removed from the altar frontal in 1965. The quatrefoil medallion encloses a half-length figure of a young martyr saint. Probably Venice, second half of the 16th century. V&A T.1A-1965

apparently for a high amount, allegedly because the diocese was in need of funds to cover the costs of some building works on the cathedral. This letter is currently the only known document to reveal how the frontal came to be in the possession of L. Bernheimer: *As regards the antependium I should say that same is still in an acceptable condition if one considers the fact that it is over 600 years old. Besides, I could imagine that your technical staff would easily find efficient means for the protection and preservation of the piece. As to the price, I feel that the figures which you mention are really very low. When my father acquired this altar frontal, he had to pay an extremely high price for it, all the more as this money had to be used by the priests for paying important reconstruction work at the Veglia Cathedral. Anyhow, in this particular case it is not my intention to assume an obstinate attitude. No doubt, you will understand that I should appreciate if this important piece of embroidery came into the possession of the Victoria & Albert Museum and that, besides, this transfer would be a matter of prestige to our firm. From this point of view I wish to leave it to you to make us a definite offer for the antependium. Would that you could see your way to make the figure between £8000 and £9000. Of course, our firm would be ready to send the embroidery to London, so that the Director of the Museum could see it before coming to a decision.*²⁴

This was followed by the letter from George Wingfield Digby, dated 25th June, in which he stated that the Museum would be willing to pay £8,000, that is, the lower amount proposed by Ludwig

²⁴ This letter ends with *Whilst seeing forward to the pleasure of hearing from you again, I remain with kind regards, yours sincerely, L. Bernheimer [signed by hand].*

Bernheimer. In addition, he made clear that the final decision would be made after the further assessment of the altar frontal to be carried out in London: *Thank you very much for your letter of 19th June about the embroidered altar frontal from Veglia; I appreciate what you say. I have discussed the matter further with the Director of the Museum and we feel that we can consider the purchase in terms of a figure round about £8,000. But before coming to a definite decision we should like to see the antependium here for careful consideration. We shall want to take into consideration the question of restoration. May me therefore avail ourselves of your offer to send it here? We want to feel free to make up our minds as to its acquisition on seeing it here, but we understand, should we decide to purchase it, we should have to discuss a price with you around £8,000.*²⁵

Ludwig Bernheimer responded affirmatively and by swiftly organising transport. In the letter of 30th June he informed George Wingfield Digby of the company entrusted with the shipment of the altar frontal and of the date of its arrival in London: *With great pleasure we received your letter of June 25th. Accordingly we forward to you the altar frontal from Veglia by Air. The plane which is carrying the tapestry, leaves on July 1st around 19h the airport Riem-Munich and arrives a few hours later in London. Addressee in London of the Altar Frontal is the forwarding Agent of Antiques, Pitt & Scott Ltd.²⁶ 1/3 Sanket Pauls, Sherd Yard, London E.C.4, this firm is supposed to advise you of the arrival of the tapestry. We send you the frontal piece on approval and certainly it will be a pleasure for us if the Museum would buy it.*²⁷

On 8th July Donald King informed Ludwig Bernheimer of the safe delivery of the frontal as well as of the time needed for the Museum to come back to him with the final decision on the acquisition: *I write to inform you that the altar frontal from Veglia has arrived in the Museum in good order. Both Mr. Wingfield Digby and Sir Trenchard Cox are at present absent from the Museum, so that there is likely to be a delay of a few weeks before you receive their decision on the question of purchase. I can assure you, however, that the matter will be brought to their attention as soon as they return.*²⁸



Fig. 9. Part of an orphrey, removed from the altar frontal in 1965. In the above compartment was either God the Father or Christ. The only remnants of what was enclosed in the medallion underneath it are the tongues of fire. Probably Venice, second half of the 16th century. V&A T.1B-1965

²⁵ Closing: *Yours sincerely, G. F. Wingfield Digby, Keeper, Department of Textiles* [all typewritten].

²⁶ Upon having received the letter, on July the 2nd Donald King wrote a note to be passed onto the company; *According to the preceding letter, this important 14th century embroidered altar frontal, consigned to us via Pitt and Scott, should have arrived at London airport yesterday evening. Could you please ask Pitt and Scott to expedite delivery – we don't want it to hang around in their warehouse for weeks as has happened on some previous occasions.*

²⁷ Closing: *Yours sincerely, L. Bernheimer* [signed by hand].

²⁸ Closing: *Yours faithfully, D. King, Deputy Keeper, Department of Textiles* [all typewritten].



Fig. 10. *The Virgin and Child (left) and a Bishop Saint (right). Removed from the altar frontal in 1965. Probably Venice, second half of the 16th century. V&A T.1D-1965 and T.1C-1965*

AN EXPENSIVE ACQUISITION: CONVINCING THE MUSEUM AND RAISING THE MONEY

At this point, the internal negotiations started to dominate the Registered File in the V&A Archive: the exchanges between Donald King, George Wingfield Digby and Sir George Trenchard Cox, from which it is clear that action to raise the necessary funds had commenced. The first move was the appeal to the National Art Collections Fund.²⁹ Such appeals involved a full justification of the significance of the piece and the accuracy of the market value. Since a specialist curator was required to provide the information for the Director to make the case, on 13th July Donald King wrote to George Trenchard Cox, enclosing with the note his acquisition proposal (transcribed in the Introduction):

Director,

Attached is a draft of a note on the altar frontal, to accompany the letter to N.A.C.F., which I assume you will wish to draft personally.

Bernheimer sent the frontal to London following Mr Digby's letter of 25th June, in which he wrote: 'we feel that we can consider the purchase in terms of a figure round about £8,000'. You may wish to mention that such a figure compares quite favourably with £33,000 for the Butler-Bowdon cope nearly 10 years ago.

If you send the attached colour photos to N.A.C.F., may we please request their return? They are the only photos we have.³⁰

²⁹ The National Art Collections Fund (today Art Fund) is a charity founded in 1903 with the mission to help British museums to purchase works of art for their collections.

³⁰ The note is handwritten and ends with initials *DK*.



Fig. 11a and 11b. Fragment of an embroidery, overall and detail (bust of a prophet?). Removed from the altar frontal in 1965. Venice, 1330-1350. V&A T.1E-1965

George Wingfield Digby was absent from the Museum at the time, but he obviously wanted to be kept informed. In a note of 14th July, Donald King shared with him that Sir George Trenchard Cox had decided to allocate everything remaining in the Museum's acquisition fund for that year: *Mr Pope-Hennessy saw the altar-frontal in the Italian Gothic gallery on Tuesday of last week and decided that he would like to exhibit it here, beneath the large Venetian sculpture of the Madonna della Misericordia.*³¹ The

³¹ This must refer to the relief *Virgin and Child with kneeling members of the Guild of the Misericordia*, carved by Bartolomeo Buon about 1374-1467 for the tympanum over the principal doorway of the Scuola Vecchia di Santa Maria della Misericordia in Venice (V&A 25-1882). The relief is now on display in the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries (Room 50a).



Fig. 12. Sections of the embroidered band, removed from the altar frontal in 1965. Venice, 1330-1350.
V&A T.1F-1965 and T.1G-1965

Director saw it on Friday last and decided that he would commit all that remains of this year's purchase grant (about £5,000) towards its acquisition. When he returns from the Museums Association conference on Thursday he will write to N.A.C.F. to enquire what assistance they would be prepared to offer; I have drafted a note on the object, for enclosure with his letter.³² The decision to consume the entire sum left in the budget is quite possibly the best piece of evidence to prove how strong the desire was to have the altar frontal in the V&A's collection. By agreeing to use up this budget so early in the year, the Director was preventing the Museum from making any other purchases in any medium until April 1965 the earliest.

Since the Museum was £3,000 short, George Trenchard Cox quickly reached out to the National Art Collections Fund asking for financial support. Already on 17th July, Sir William Emrys Williams dropped him an encouraging note: *The Altar Frontal sounds just the thing you ought to have, and I must see what we can do about it. I am writing to David Crawford today and, if he approves, I will then get in touch with the other members of the Executive Committee, as we do not meet formally again until October. For this reason, as well as for the Post Office slow down, the operation may take a little time, but I will do my best. I should like to keep the coloured photographs for the time being, as the London members of the Committee will be able to come and see them here.*³³

On 23rd July, George Wingfield Digby updated Ludwig Bernheimer and explained that raising the necessary funds might take some time: *I got back from a short holiday in Scotland to find the 14th century embroidered altar frontal had arrived safely, and had been looked at by several of my colleagues. Since then I have looked at it with the Director of the Museum, and we have discussed the possibility of its purchase. We very much admire this splendid altar frontal, and hope to be able to acquire it for this Museum but this involves asking for some financial support from various bodies friendly to the Museum. We have commenced with this, and hope you will understand this may take a little time, particularly as it is now a holiday season. I will write again as soon as I am able to, and I hope then to be able to give you a definite decision about this purchase.*³⁴

When it became evident that it would take the National Art Collections Fund time to come back with a decision, George Wingfield Digby wrote to Munich again on 6th August, not only to make Ludwig Bernheimer aware of the delays but also to ask for the final confirmation of the price: *We are experiencing some difficulty in raising the necessary money for the purchase of the embroidered Altar Frontal from Veglia, but we have got to the point when we would like to come to a definite agreement with you about the*

³² The note is handwritten and ends with initials DK.

³³ Closing: *With best wishes, yours ever, Bill* [signed by hand].

³⁴ Closing: *Yours sincerely, G. F. Wingfield Digby, Keeper, Department of Textiles* [all typewritten].

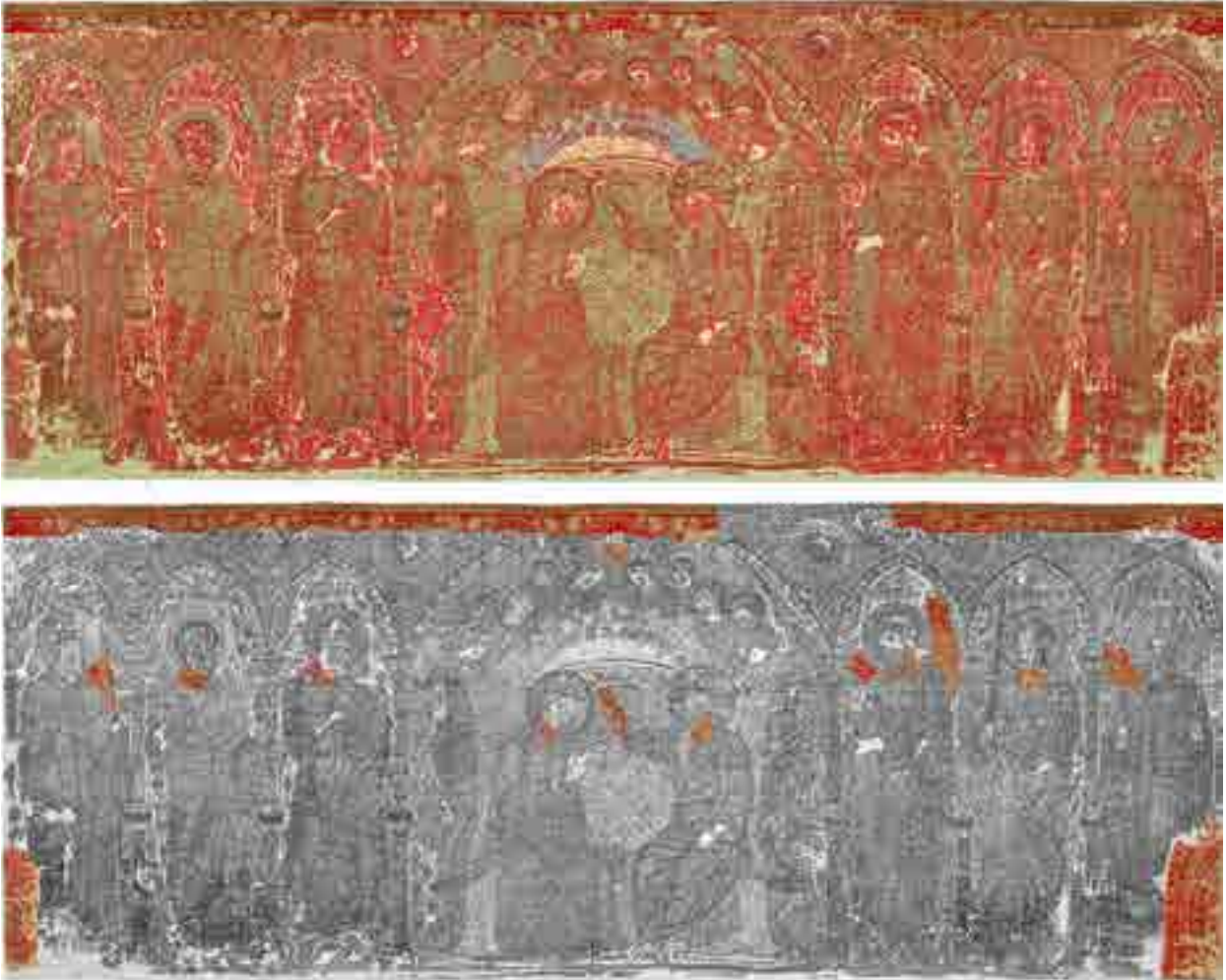


Fig. 13. The Veglia altar frontal today. Highlighted are the patches not removed in 1965. V&A T.1-1965

purchase price. In view of the Frontal's relatively frayed condition, and the patches of old material (some from the original piece, others not) which have been used for its present make-up, our conservation staff is going to be involved in a good deal of restoration work. The condition of the embroidery does somewhat detract from its appeal, except perhaps to the expert. So far you have met us very amicably over this question, and if you were now able to confirm the price as not more than £8,000, I have good hopes of our being able to raise the money. But I should have the greatest difficulty in persuading the Director and our supporters to accept a higher figure.³⁵

Ludwig Bernheimer's response, dated August 10th, was affirmative: *Let me thank you for your kind letter of August 6th. You will certainly understand that selling the Altar Frontal to your Museum would be a matter of prestige to our firm. We should, indeed, feel honoured if the embroidery came into your possession. I will, therefore, not hesitate in confirming to you that we would be ready to sell the Altar Frontal to your Museum at the price of £ 8,000.*³⁶

George Wingfield Digby acknowledged receipt of the letter on 18th August and took the opportunity to stress that it would take about two months at least until the Museum raised the full amount, which did not cause Ludwig Bernheimer any concern: *Thank you very much for your helpful letter of August 10th in which you agreed to the price of £8,000 for the embroidered altar frontal from Veglia.*

³⁵ Closing: *Yours sincerely, G. F. Wingfield Digby, Keeper, Department of Textiles* [all typewritten].

³⁶ Closing: *Whilst seeing forward to your further news in this matter, I am, yours sincerely* [signed by hand].

*We are working hard to raise the necessary funds, but August is very much a holiday month in London and we have to await the meetings of one or two bodies in September. I hope to be able to write to you definitely about the purchase in October. We are most grateful to you for your helpful attitude.*³⁷

On 8th October, Sir William Emrys Williams wrote to Sir George Trenchard Cox informing him about the amount allocated by the National Art Collections Fund: *At its meeting yesterday afternoon the Committee decided to offer you £2,000 as a contribution towards the purchase of the Altar Frontal.*

*In doing so they expressed the earnest hope that you would leave the work in its present condition.*³⁸

The Director expressed his gratitude in his letter written already on the following day, reassuring Williams that the planned conservation works on the frontal should not result in significant alterations: *I am most grateful to you and to the Fund for the generous contribution towards the purchase of the Altar Frontal. We shall be delighted to receive a cheque made out to the Department of Education and Science. With all good wishes, yours ever / P.S. I agree that we should not attempt to alter the appearance of the Frontal. [all typewritten].*

At this point, the Museum needed to raise the remaining £1,000. Pleas to support the acquisition were sent out to the following textile- and embroidery-related guilds of London: the Worshipful Company of Merchant Taylors, the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, the Worshipful Company of Mercers, the Worshipful Company of Drapers, the Worshipful Company of Clothworkers, the Worshipful Company of Dyers, the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers, the Worshipful Company of Weavers and the Worshipful Company of Broderers. Even though the majority of the companies had contributed in 1955 to the purchase of another piece of medieval ecclesiastical embroidery, the Butler-Bowdon cope, in this case only the latter two responded positively, sending cheques for £50 and £100 respectively in early November. This development must have caused anxiety, because Ludwig Bernheimer had been told that he would quite likely receive the full payment in October. In an effort to secure the balance of £850, Sir George Trenchard Cox wrote to the Wolfson Foundation on 9th November. Since weeks had passed without a reply, George Wingfield Digby had no option but to write to Ludwig Bernheimer on 30th November, informing him about the situation: *I am very sorry to have kept you waiting so long over payment for the 14th century embroidered Altar Frontal from Veglia (Krk). We have collected most of the Funds*



14. Fragment of an embroidery, with a full standing figure of a female saint, stitched on the bottom right corner of the altar frontal. Venice, 1330-1350

³⁷ The letter ends, as usual, with *Yours sincerely G. F. Wingfield Digby, Keeper, Department of Textiles* [all typewritten]. On 21st August Ludwig Bernheimer replied: *Dear Mr. Digby, I wish to thank you very much for your favoured letter of August 18th by which you gave us further information about the altar frontal. I took note that you hope to be able to give us definite news about the purchase in October, and I readily agree to this. Believe to be, Yours sincerely,* [signed by hand].

³⁸ Closing: *With best wishes, yours ever, Bill* [signed by hand].



Fig. 15a. and 15b. Fragment stitched on the bottom left corner of the altar frontal: details of the scrolling stem comprising lotus flowers. Venice, 1330-1350

needed for this purchase, but are still a few hundred pounds short; I hope we shall be able to settle this matter in a few weeks' time now.³⁹ He must have been relieved when he read Bernheimer's cordial response of 7th December: *With many thanks we acknowledge your letter of November 30th regarding the 14th century Altar Frontal from Veglia (Krk). With pleasure we accept your offer to make the payment later, hoping that the Balance arrives here early next year.*⁴⁰

On 11th December, Sir Harold Redman wrote to Sir George Trenchard Cox on behalf of the Wolfson Foundation, relaying their decision and enclosing the cheque that finally enabled the Museum to make the payment: *With further reference to your letter of the 9th November last, I am glad to be able to say that the Trustees of the Wolfson Foundation have agreed to the finding of the balance of £850 needed to save the 14th Century Embroidered Altar Frontal for the nation. I have great pleasure in enclosing herewith a cheque for that amount, and would be grateful if receipt could be acknowledged in due course please.*⁴¹ This was received not only with enormous gratitude – as expressed in the Director's letter of 14th December⁴² – but also with sincere joy. His handwritten note sent to George Wingfield Digby (Fig. 2) tells of the excitement and relief that overwhelmed him upon having heard the good news.

³⁹ Closing: *Yours sincerely, G. F. Wingfield Digby, Keeper, Department of Textiles* [all typewritten].

⁴⁰ Closing: *Sincerely yours, L. Bernheimer* [signed by hand].

⁴¹ Closing: *Yours sincerely, H Redman* [signed by hand].

⁴² *Dear Sir Harold, I am deeply grateful to the Trustees of the Wolfson Foundation for their generosity in making it possible for us to buy the altar frontal; and hasten to send them, through you, a message of my most cordial thanks. It would give me a great pleasure if you or any of the Trustees could find time to visit this Museum and allow me to show you the Frontal and some of our other treasures. Yours sincerely, Trenchard Cox, Director* [all typewritten].

Finally, on 15th December, about nine months after George Wingfield Digby first saw the altar frontal in Munich, he wrote to Ludwig Bernheimer confirming that the sum had been reached and that the purchase could be finalised: *I am glad to be able to say that at last we have collected the necessary funds for paying for the 14th century embroidered altar frontal from Veglia (Krk). The payment will be made to you shortly through the Accountant General's office of the Department of Education, but I must again apologise for having kept you waiting so long for this payment. We shall soon now have the altar frontal in our Gallery. Its home will be in the rooms of North Italian medieval sculpture on the ground floor, but we shall be showing the frontal, to begin with, in the New Acquisitions Court near the main entrance for two or three months.*⁴³

The transaction was processed in the following weeks and on 25th January 1965 L. Bernheimer issued the receipt of the payment for the altar frontal (Fig. 3), which was then sent to London together with Ludwig Bernheimer's letter in which he wrote: *We really appreciate that this fine piece of embroidery has come into the possession of your Museum where it certainly has the place it deserves.*

A NEW ACQUISITION CONSERVED: 'UNPACKING' THE OBJECT FOR CONSERVATION AND INTERPRETATION

The frontal entered a new life once it was accessioned. It was thoroughly examined by Donald King whose study surpassed the ones by Dragutin Kniewald and Betty Kurth. Already in 1965 he published an extensive paper on the altar frontal, reflecting on its condition with only a few, but precise remarks: *A number of holes have been patched with fragments from another, apparently contemporary embroidery. The top edge of the frontal has been made up with pieces of an orphrey from the 16th or 17th century.*⁴⁴ He delved no further into the 'patches', possibly because it would have been quite a challenge to discuss them appropriately in a paper illustrated solely with black and white photographs. However, it must have been Donald King who hastened the commencement of conservation works and had the final say on which of the patches ought to be removed. Now is the opportunity to say more about how these interventions altered the altar frontal's appearance. These were not substantial as they mainly involved the removal of about nine embroidered fragments that had been used to patch it. This patching, undoubtedly, took place whilst the frontal was still in Krk, the interventions probably dating to the 19th century.

Figure 4 illustrates the locations of the patches which were completely or partially removed during conservation in 1965. The most prominent 19th-century 'addition' was of course the band running along the full length of the frontal's top edge. It consisted of a number of fragments dating from the second half of the 16th century, which varied in size. Only one section of the band was unstitched during conservation, in order to show fully the representation of the Moon which had been partially concealed underneath it (the location of the removed section is indicated in Figure 13). After it was detached from the altar frontal this section was not accessioned as its part object.

The fragments re-used to make up the band most probably originate in the orphrey of a cope. Two copes with comparable embroideries have survived in the convent of St Francis in Šibenik (Figs. 5a and 5b), the most distinguishable feature being the blue satin used for the ground, instead of a red one; such is the satin of the orphreys of a chasuble in Komiža on the island of Vis (Fig. 6). Regardless of the variants in colour, all orphreys have in common a silk satin ground, lined with linen and embroidered with silver-gilt and silk threads in satin stitch and raised and couched work. Their designs consist of elongated compartments enclosing saintly figures, joined by a symmetrical arrangement of scrolling stems bearing formal flowers. Indeed, the locations of all three examples in Dalmatia suggest the dissemination of such embroideries, which were made in the workshops of Venice and quite probably in more affluent towns in its hinterland during the second half of the 16th century. They were designed exclusively to adorn copes, chasubles and dalmatics. A number of vestments decorat-

⁴³ Closing: *Yours sincerely, G. F. Wingfield Digby, Keeper of the Department of Textiles* [all typewritten].

⁴⁴ D. KING, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 16.

ed with similar embroideries have been documented in churches in Veneto and Lombardy. For example, the Cathedral of Gambarare houses a chasuble (Fig. 7) with front and back orphreys of this type.⁴⁵

Therefore, the presence of these orphrey fragments on the altar frontal suggests that the Cathedral in Krk owned a similar set of vestments which has been dismantled and the pieces of embroidery subsequently applied to the frontal. As is evident from Figure 4, there was a number of complementary fragments on the frontal at the time it was acquired. The crescent-shaped patch, placed immediately above the central Coronation scene, is another fragment which was removed from the altar frontal but not accessioned as a part object. All the remaining unstitched fragments were accessioned and given part numbers. Such is fragment T.1A-1965, consisting of a large rectangular piece of an orphrey and a smaller square piece sewn together at right angles (Fig. 8). It was originally on the lower left-hand corner of the frontal (Fig. 4). The small square piece contains a quatrefoil compartment to which has been applied a half-length figure of a male saint holding a palm of martyrdom. This figure is worked in silver-gilt thread and coloured silks in split stitch and couched on linen. In one of the compartments of the large piece a marked outline and stitch marks are visible, where a similar, full-length figure was once placed. On the opposite end of the altar frontal was the smaller fragment (T.1B-1965) with part of the figure of God the Father or Christ applied to one of the compartments. The compartment below comprises tongues of fire (Fig. 9). The figures of the Virgin with Child and a Bishop Saint (Fig. 10), which must originally have been placed within elongated orphrey compartments, were stitched to the either side of the central group. The Virgin holding the Child (T.1D-1965) was to the left, and the figure of a bishop holding a book and a crosier (T.1C-1965) was placed to the right (Fig. 4).

The next two parts that have been removed belong to a larger group of patches of particular interest, the majority of these having been left in place. As Donald King already noted, these patches were cut from an embroidery contemporary with the altar frontal. Even though these sections are far too small and frayed to permit a definitive conclusion about the object from which they originate, the piece was undoubtedly embroidered in Venice between 1330 and 1350, in silver-gilt threads and coloured silks, on the red silk taffeta ground lined with linen. The embroidery with metal threads is worked in the same undercouching technique. However, the visibly brighter red taffeta and the somewhat coarser linen used for backing, indicate clearly that these fragments



Fig. 16. Embroidered burse panel, edged with a scrolling stem comprising lotus flowers, Venice, about 1325. V&A T.92-1969
© Victoria and Albert Museum

⁴⁵ For further information see: L. BERTI, *Antichi paramenti sacri nel Duomo di Gambarare*, Master's Thesis, Ca'Foscari University, Venice, academic year 2007/2008, pp. 106-109.

differ from the rest, i.e. that they did not originally belong to the altar frontal. It is possible that these are the remnants of another altar frontal or perhaps a processional banner, but whatever the nature of the object, it is evident that the Cathedral in Krk had owned at least one other elaborate example of *opus venetum*. One part of it, fragment T.1E-1965, was stitched near the bottom right end of the frontal. The embroidered design is almost obliterated but it evidently included formal flowers worked in coloured silks and a bust of a prophet (☩) in a roundel (Figs. 11a and 11b). What was also removed, but originates from this same object, are the narrow fragments decorated with a running leafy scrolling stem (T.1F-1965 and T.1G-1965) that have been sewn together to make the band used to neaten the bottom of the frontal (Fig. 12). Also, it is worth noting that the smaller part of fragment T.1A-1965 (Fig. 8) has itself been patched with a piece of 14th-century embroidery. Could this be considered evidence that all patching, both with 14th- and 16th-century fragments, occurred at the same time?

During conservation the decision was made to leave a number of corresponding 14th-century fragments on the altar frontal, in the same position as they were found. Figure 13 shows the current state of the frontal with all the present patches highlighted. At least twelve fragments of *opus venetum* had been used to mend the damage that mostly occurred in the areas of the saints' busts. For example, the original right hand of Christ had been cut out to be replaced with one of such fragments. Two larger, rectangular pieces had been stitched on the left and right bottom corners of the frontal in order to mask the excessive wear that these zones had suffered. In the right corner is a fragment with a full figure of a female saint standing underneath a pointed arch (Fig. 14). On the opposite side is a fragment with a scrolling stem comprising lotus flowers, beautifully worked in coloured silk threads (Figs. 15a and 15b). A similar leafy stem with coloured lotus flowers makes the border of the burse (V&A T.92-1969) embroidered in Venice about 1325 (Fig. 16).⁴⁶

CLOSING REMARKS

The aim of this essay is twofold. First, to demonstrate how working through the museum records can add significantly to what we know not only about an object's provenance and history, but also about circumstances surrounding its purchase, which can – as shown – elucidate how highly desirable acquisition it was and for what reasons. This particular case, so thoroughly documented, sheds more light on how rare and prized the examples of *opus venetum* are, amongst which the Veglia Altar Frontal stands out as an unrivalled masterpiece. It merits the title, regardless of the wear it has suffered and of the many fragments used to conceal the damage. A comprehensive reflection on these patches is thus the second and not less important section of the essay. It aims to contribute to the knowledge of the object's history, which is of vital importance for the accurate interpretation of the altar frontal and its parts housed at the V&A. These analyses should also aid conservators who will be working on it in the future.

Probably the most appropriate way to conclude this contribution to the story of this outstanding piece of medieval embroidery is by paraphrasing Donald King's observations: in spite of its frayed condition, the Veglia Altar Frontal nevertheless commands attention from the spectator with the authority of a great work of art. At the time that his paper was published, the frontal was on display in the Room 23, on the ground floor of the V&A, while today it is in storage. Hopefully, in the near future it shall be conserved again and put on public view to be admired in its full right.

⁴⁶It was Donald King who recognized the production place and date of the burse, which had previously been in the Untermyer Collection and described as 'Portuguese or Spanish executed in China, 17th century'. Because of his expertise, the Museum was able to buy it for only £100. N. ROTHSTEIN, *op. cit.* (n. 7), p. 116.

Bilješke o ulasku antependija iz katedrale u Krku u Muzej Viktorije i Alberta u Londonu i o tada poduzetom konzervatorsko-restauratorskom zahvatu

Antependij naručen oko 1330. godine za katedralu u Krku i izvezen prema crtežu Paola Veneziana je bez premca najmonumentalnije u svijetu sačuvano djelo venecijanskih srednjovjekovnih vezi-lačkih radionica. Unatoč činjenici da je, počevši od 1929. godine, višekratno objavljivan i u domaćoj i u inozemnoj literaturi, dosad nisu u cijelosti razjašnjene okolnosti njegova odlaska s Krka, prvo u München, te oko trideset i pet godina poslije u zbirku tekstila Muzeja Viktorije i Alberta (*Victoria and Albert Museum*) u Londonu, u kojem mu je dodijeljena inventarna oznaka T.1-1965. Ovaj rad se stoga prvenstveno posvećuje objavi sadržaja njegova dosjea pohranjenog u arhivu Muzeja Viktorije i Alberta, a u kojem najraniji dokument datira iz ožujka 1964. godine. Transkribirana su pisma koja su voditelj zbirke tekstila George Wingfield Digby i njegov zamjenik Donald King razmjenjivali eksterno – s trgovcem umjetninama i tadašnjim vlasnikom antependija Ludwigom Ottom Bernheimerom u Münchenu – ali i interno; među sobom te s ondašnjim ravnateljem Muzeja sir Georgeom Trenchardom Coxom. Iz ovih se mnogobrojnih i brzo razmjenjivanih pisama, te iz ostale interne dokumentacije (stručnih izvješća i mišljenja o antependiju), može steći dojam o uzbuđenju koje je u Muzeju vladalo oko ove vrijedne i rijetke umjetnine, o dinamičnim pregovorima o kupnji, te o gotovo grozničavim naporima da se, u mjesecima nakon dogovora o konačnoj cijeni, namakne pozamašan iznos koji je, naposljetku, u siječnju 1965. godine transferiran u München.

Minhenska trgovina umjetninama *L. Bernheimer* je dakle tek u siječnju 1965. godine prestala biti vlasnikom antependija. Zahvaljujući jednom od pisama koje je u London poslao Ludwig Otto Bernheimer saznajemo da je njegov otac, Otto Bernheimer, kupio antependij od krčke katedralne župe za značajan, no nepoznat iznos, a koji je župi tada navodno bio neophodan radi plaćanja nužnih građevinskih zahvata na katedrali. Iako se i ranije znalo da je antependij dospio u München već oko 1930. godine, ovo pismo svjedoči da nije bilo posrednika u kupnji, odnosno da prije Otta Bernheimera nije imao drugih, privremenih vlasnika. Točna godina, odnosno bar približan datum prodaje antependija Ottu Bernheimeru i dalje ostaje nepoznata.

U drugom dijelu članka donose se dosad nepoznati podatci o stanju antependija u trenutku njegova ulaska u Muzej te o rezultatima konzervatorsko-restauratorskog zahvata kojemu je nedugo potom bio podvrgnut. Po prvi put se objavljuje njegova fotografija u boji, snimljena još u Münchenu, na kojoj se vidi broj i smještaj fragmenata veza iz druge polovine 16. stoljeća koji su na antependij najvjerojatnije bili prišiveni tijekom 19. stoljeća. Uzduž njegova gornjega ruba je tako bio apliciran vezeni rub pluvijala, kojemu veći dio nije uklonjen. Iskorištena je prigoda da se drugi dosad poznati primjerci ovakvog veza iz druge polovine 16. stoljeća, sačuvani na istočnoj obali Jadrana, objave u kontekstu analize ovih fragmenata. Zaključno, vizualnom analizom antependija ustanovljen je niz fragmenata upotrijebljenih za ispune njegovih oštećenja još dok se nalazio u Krku, a koji su, bez sumnje, preuzeti s neke druge umjetnine izvezene u Veneciji tijekom druge četvrtine 14. stoljeća. Postojanje tih fragmenata je stoga važan pokazatelj da ovaj veličanstveni antependij nije bio jedini primjerak trećentističkog mletačkoga veza koji je katedrala u Krku nekad posjedovala.

Ključne riječi: *antependij iz katedrale u Krku (the Veglia Altar Frontal), Muzej Viktorije i Alberta (Victoria and Albert Museum), George Wingfield Digby, Donald King, Ludwig Otto Bernheimer, Otto Bernheimer, sir George Trenchard Cox*