Ecclesiastical Art Department, the Early Years

The Ecclesiastical Art Department was begun in Gurtweil, Germany, in 1858 when Fr. Herman Kessler, the Sisters’ chaplain, encouraged this new venture as a means of augmenting the sisters’ meager income. Fr. Kessler secured an instructor to teach the sisters. The venture was a success; the embroidery department was kept so busy that occasionally sisters worked through the night.

Augusta Volk entered the community at the age of 30. It is said of her that she was “skilled in hand tambourine stitching.” She did not get to ply her skill for very long because in 1865 she was appointed superior of the Gurtweil sisters [hence Mother Augusta] by authorities in the Roman congregation in 1865. [Remember at that time we were still affiliated with Maria De Mattias’ community.]

But what is tambourine stitching?

Tambourine (tambor) stitching is a kind of embroidery in which the seamstress uses a hook as fine as a sewing needle. She pushes the needle through fabric tightly stretched on a hoop, catches the thread, and pulls a loop back through the fabric and through the loop, thus creating a continuous line of chain stitches.


Tambourine stitching is still done in the EAD, although now it is done on a machine.

Sr. Rose Margaret Wessels and Sr. Josepha Bauer both stitch on the tambourine machine.

Sr. Helen Irene Przeradzki used to make banners with inspirational sayings stitched in cursive lettering, to the delight of those who watched her custom-make banners for them.
A highlight of the Department’s work is the **chasuble entered in competition in the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, aka St. Louis World’s Fair.** Sr. Bernarda Lips (or Lipps) and Sr. Claudia Tremmel worked on the chasuble. The chasuble won first prize and was awarded a medal for “perfection of fine art work.” The chasuble, along with some other pieces and the medal, was donated to the St. Louis Art Museum in 1996, and were on display July, 1997–January, 1998 during the first part of a year-long show featuring “The Art of Embroidery.” At present they are in storage. [Witness, quarterly newsletter published by the Office of Co-Vicar for Religious—Archdiocese of St. Louis, no date.]

Sr. Bernarda was born in Esach, Baden and entered the community in Gurtweil in 1869 at the age of 18. She came to the U.S. with the fourth group of sisters in 1873. She is included in a list of the Sisters responsible for the managing of the Department, 1858-1877. She died at the age of 82 in 1933.

Sr. Claudia was born in Strassburg, Germany. How she found her way to O’Fallon would be interesting to know, since the Gurtweil community had all emigrated from Germany before she was born in 1878. She began work in the Department as a postulant in 1896 and remained there until 1957, a total of 61 years. Sister died in 1962.
Msgr. Martin B. Hellriegel, chaplain to the sisters in O’Fallon 1918-1940, was instrumental in promoting greater interest in liturgical art which was more symbolic and less sentimental in style.

One of these symbols, especially dear to the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood, was the Paschal Lamb slain and victorious, described in Revelations 5:1-12. Years later when Sr. Hiltrudis designed the present EAD logo, the Lamb became its centerpiece.

Msgr. Hellriegel influenced not only the designs stitched on the vestments, but the very shape of the vestment, which replaced the stiffer Roman style with the fuller free-flowing Gothic style still used today.

In 1938 there were 18 sisters working in the department, plus two novices and a postulant. By this time, the work of the sisters was known beyond the Archdiocese of St. Louis, and the sisters were kept very busy, working long hours to fulfill the orders that were coming in from all over the country.
Sister Anselma Lange, who entered the community in 1894, was sent to Europe to study art as a young Sister. She made final profession in June 1905 and was appointed head of the embroidery department six months later, January 1906, until her death, June 15, 1945, a total of 39.5 years.

As directress, Sister Anselma was known for her charity, and many poor missions were the recipients of vestments, albs, and other articles without a thought of any required payment.

Sr. Hiltrudis Powers was just out of the novitiate when she was sent to study art. She worked with Sr. Anselma for three years before being appointed directress of the Department the day after her 25th birthday; she continued in the position for 55 years—1945-2000—retiring at the age of 80.

Much more can be said about the EAD under Sr. Hiltrudis’ leadership, but that will require another issue of the newsletter.

This information was taken from the history of the EAD by Sr. Cecile Gunelson, the present director. The photos are from the Archives.