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Georgian Liturgical Textile

Georgia, 19th century

Velvet embroidered with metal threads

59.5 cm high, 59 cm wide

Stock no.: A6088

Provenance: From an historic French house; thought to have been in the same family for at least 100 years.

A velvet textile embroidered with two peacocks, heads turned away from each other, and two unidentified corvine birds drinking from a chalice.

The detailed designs would have been sketched free-hand in chalk and then filled in with several different types of chain-stitch running in different directions. Metal thread is embroidered over areas padded with bundles of string, imitating the appearance of repoussé metalwork.¹

In addition to stock no. A6089, there is a third textile with the same design and similar dimensions (60.5 x 62cm), published in a 1973 book. Though the textile has since been turned into a cushion cover, its intended use was as a ciborium cloth for Tbilisi Sioni Cathedral.² Our textiles may well share this provenance, and could have been used as a set of altar linens in this cathedral.

Peacocks have long been used as a symbol of eternal life in Christian art, reflecting pagan beliefs that the peacocks' bodies never decay.³ They appear in early Georgian Christian reliefs, such as a capital in the Baptistry of Zion, Bolsini, dating to the 5th century.⁴ The motif of peacocks drinking from an urn, representing the Eucharistic chalice, occurs in several Byzantine works. A fourth-century mosaic in the Stobi, Macedonia, depicts peacocks and deer drinking from an urn.⁵ The famous Mosaic of Theodoulos in Sousse, Tunisia, dating to from the 5th to mid-6th century CE, features pairs of partridges, peacocks, ducks, and pheasants drinking from a very similar urn.⁶ Another similar example of peacocks dating to the 6th century was preserved in Chersonesus, the ancient Greek colony located in modern-day Ukraine.⁷

While the peacock motif derives from early Christian art, the floral embroidery shows Persian influence. The borders, probably pre-made and cut to size, resemble those of Iranian miniature paintings.

[1] Melikishvili, Izolda. 'Traditions and technique of artistic embroidery in Georgia' / 'მხატვრული ნაკრები საქართველოში.' *Museum and Globalization* 1 (2023), pp. 217–236; 222.

[2] Ketevah Davitishvili. *The Old Georgian Embroidery*. Tbilisi: Khelovneba, 1973, cat. 19.

[3] Litovchenko, Anna N., Michael V. Fomin, and Aleksey G. Chekal. 'On the Origin of the Early Christian Artistic Tradition in Byzantine Chersonesos', *Athens Journal of History* 1.3 (2015), pp. 223–238: p. 226.

[4] Machabeli, K. 'Adaptation of Elements of Sasanian Art in Early Christian Georgian Reliefs.' *Hunara: Journal of Ancient Iranian Arts and History* 2.2 (2024), pp. 107-127: p. 120.

[5] 'The Episcopal Basilica', *Archaeological Site Stobi*, retrieved online via <http://www.stobi.mk/templates/pages/excavations.aspx?page=163> on 24.09.2025.

[6] Parrish, David. 'The Mosaic of Theodoulos from Sousse (Tunisia)', *Antiquitésafricaines* 16 (1980), pp. 229–239: p. 230.

[7] Litovchenko et al. *Op. Cit.*, p. 234.