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A rare Charles II embroidered perfume carrier

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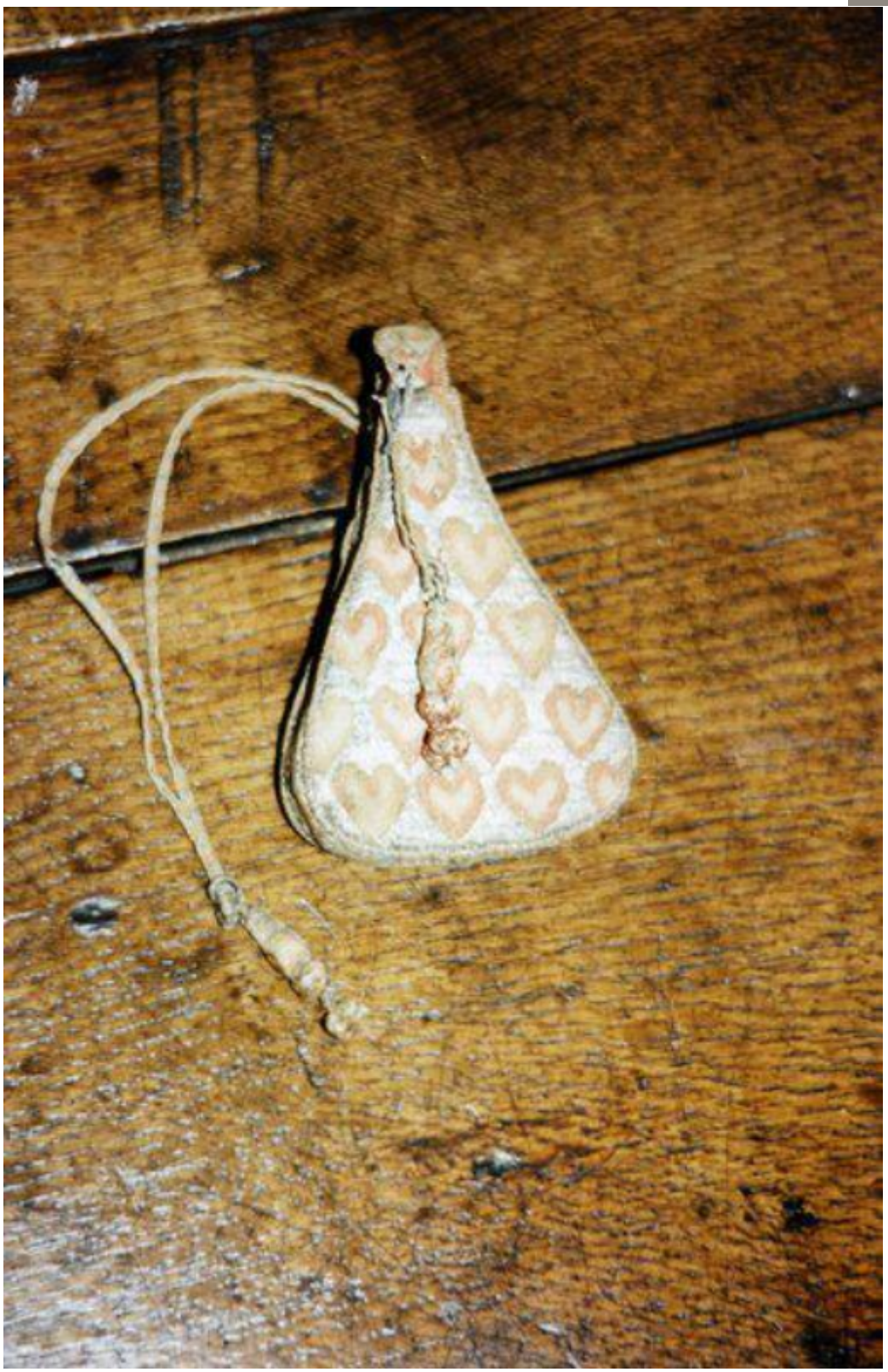

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REF: 10587

Description

Worked in silver thread and decorated with pink hearts. The front pocket containing "the hand of love" (a silk cutwork hand). English, circa 1680.

Provenance : G Saville Seligman Esq.
Reference: Domestic Needlework (Saville & Hughes), plate 52, illustration C.

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The use of perfume began long ago, and many allusions are to be found in the Bible. It is from the Eastern nations with their ancient wisdom in this art, that Eastern civilization derived its infatuation for the rare and mysterious essences which became so fashionable.

In the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries there was a veritable cult of perfumes. During these centuries perfumes were excessively used. Linen, bed-clothes, apparel, hair, beard, and even furniture, carriages and harness were scented. People conversed with pieces of ambergris or musk in the mouth and scented sachets were concealed from head to foot.

Perfumes were costly at all periods. Mme de Pompadour spent £40,000 yearly upon them, and the sachets which contained these luxuries were also expensive and exquisitely decorated. This fashion may have been stimulated by a practical consideration. It is quite probable that perfumes of an antiseptic character were found useful to ward-off contagion after Europe had been devastated by the ravages of the Black Plague. We know that in Italy a perfumed agate ball was carried in cities during the Plague.

Though sachets and pomanders were no doubt used by the aristocracy of the Middle Ages, there is no known example of an embroidered perfume carrier before the early-17th century. The English 17th century examples harmonise perfectly with the dress of the period which was lavishly decorated with fine needlework. The perfumes employed for this purpose were impregnated powder, compressed leaves, flowers or wool and these were generally contained in a little inner bage, which accounts for the fact that many of these fragile pieces have suffed little damage beyond the wear and tear of the opening and the hanging cords.

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