

**Stained-glass roundels of the Labours of the Months**  
Norwich, 1480-1500  
Victoria and Albert Museum (C.133-1931 and 134-1931)

### Gallery Section: The Household

Depictions of the Labours of the Months are common in medieval art often in stained glass or in Books of Hours. Often makers of one type of artwork adapted the designs from another medium, so the images can sometimes be very similar. Each month is illustrated by a seasonal task or activity. Although they often appear to show ordinary people and their daily lives, and include plenty of detail of clothing, equipment and domestic interiors there is also an element of artistic licence. Depictions of peasants in art often reflect how the wealthy patron saw their position in society, rather than reality.



Here the seed-sower is dressed in a red doublet with a black hood for warmth. His legs are covered with patterned hose, or fitted trousers, all made of wool. The patterns on his hose are similar to those in the noble's clothes on the

tapestry, but it is unlikely that a peasant would have patterned cloth. This is probably just the glass painter adding his own creativity to the piece. The boots, pouch and basket are highly realistic. The pouch would be made of leather and is slung over his belt. You can also see the ridge and furrow of the field. The man in the vineyard seems to be wealthier. His clothes look finer, particularly the embroidered band on his sleeve and his long flowing hair but he is wearing the same basic outfit of doublet and hose.



Medieval stained glass was produced using several techniques including leading and painting. Pieces of coloured glass were cut up to match a pre-drawn design. Details could be painted on in black using iron oxide and, from the fourteenth century, a silver stain was used to create a range of yellow colours. The glass was then 'baked' in a kiln and the pieces then fixed together with lead.

### Teachers' Notes

#### KS3 History: Britain 1066-1500

The roundels can help students develop a sense of life in the later middle ages and how it was different from that of today. What makes each month distinctive for us nowadays, and helps us mark the passing of time? In the exhibition this object is used as part of a theme about the Household. However this object could be used equally well with pupils to explore themes such as Daily Life, Fashion and Adornment or Status & Society. There are numerous other objects which students could use to investigate any of these themes.

#### Suggested Themes: Fashion and Adornment/Status & Society/Daily Life

##### Fashion & Adornment

The roundels are an interesting source of evidence about late medieval clothing, particularly of the poorer classes of which very little material survives. Compare the peasant's clothing with that of the nobles in the *Boar and Bear Hunt* tapestry. How does the clothing reflect the different status of the wearers?

##### Status & Society

Art was used by the wealthy to demonstrate their power, wealth, status and aspirations. Society at this time was rigidly hierarchical. Patronage was very important in the creation of art and objects.

##### Art & Design KS2+

Stained glass is useful for colour work, many panels make effective use of the primary colours (red, blue and yellow). Tissue paper, or coloured acetate, can be used to mimic the effect of translucence.

Compare the roundels and their depictions of the labours of the months with those produced by the Italian artist Luca della Robbia displayed in Room 12, Italy 1400-1500.

## Key Questions

**How were the different ranks of society made visible?  
How could you tell a bishop from a priest, or a lord  
from a peasant, a knight from a king?**

Why does this exhibition mostly contain objects relating to wealthy people?

Why are there very few clothes of ordinary people in the exhibition?

How do we know what ordinary people wore **Other key objects for Status and Society / Fashion and Adornment include:**

### In the Gothic exhibition:

There are a number of paintings, stained glass panels and sculptures which show dress of all classes.

Most of the objects shown in this exhibition were made for wealthy people. Objects made for and used by poorer people tend not to survive.

### Representing Royalty

Bust of Henry VII

This shows the king who represented the top of the social pyramid or hierarchy.

### Household

Tapestry 'The Boar and Bear Hunt'

This depicts the fashions and activities of the nobility.

Painted cloth with the Seven Ages of Man, which shows a number of ordinary people in everyday dress

Triptych by Memling made for John Donne, showing the wealthy patron and members of his family in fine clothes.

### Church and People

The Erpingham chasuble

This would have been worn by a priest.

### Pilgrimage section

Wax ex-voto images including one of a woman wearing a simple dress laced up at the front.

## In the permanent galleries

Room 24. Tomb effigy of a Knight of the de Lacy family, about 1340-50.

Room 22. Effigy of a knight from Venice, about 1370-75.

Room 43. Mitre dating from 1160-1220. Mitres were worn by bishops and some abbots. There are also several examples of croziers, the staff carried by a bishop, abbot or abbess resembling a shepherd's crook.

## Further Information

Backhouse, J. *Medieval Rural Life in the Luttrell Psalter*, British Library, 2000

Brown, S. *Glass Painters* (Medieval Craftsmen series), British Museum, 1991