

**ENJOY YOUR MUSEUM**

**IVc:**

**Tapestries**

**By PHYLLIS ACKERMAN**





## TAPESTRIES

### I

Blank walls serve for a blank mind or one turned inward on itself; but the eye that sees and the spirit that answers seek to make their environment stimulating and sympathetic. Paleolithic man drew colored pictures inside his caves, and in the succeeding millenia decoration for dwelling house, council hall and place of worship has been sought in mural painting of many kinds; colored baked clay inserts; carved stone or wood; mosaics, panel pictures, embroideries, woven materials; and painted, dyed and printed fabrics, including wall paper.

From the thirteenth or fourteenth century on for some four or five hundred years, tapestries made a major contribution to color, pattern and imaginative content in the setting of life. To be sure the great panels were available for the castles and palaces of the rich only, but lesser folk could enjoy them in churches, guild halls, or at the festivals where they were displayed in public buildings and even on the streets, while in some countries, especially Scandinavia and the Germanic lands, busy housewives made their own on less ambitious scale.

These tapestries were woven of thick, bright wools, so that the vast chill gloom of gray stone interiors would seem gayer and more intimate, and the designs were chiefly illustrations—enlargements, really, of the jewel-like figures with which the painters had long since been decorating margins, initial letters, and finally whole pages of books. To be sure, there were many less elaborate tapestries, sprinkled over with the symbolic

figures and mottoes from coats of arms, or closely spattered with the little flowering plants that embroidered meadows every Spring; but the great accomplishments were the storied hangings.

## II

For these the repertoire was large. Just as the Middle Ages had never tired of carving in stone or piecing together in glowing bits of stained glass the episodes and symbols of the Christian religion, and of the Old Testament that formed its background, so in the centuries immediately following, the tapestry weavers wrought times innumerable the tragedy and triumph of Jesus; the innocent childhood, predestined ordeal and final glorification of His mother Mary; the familiar stories of the kings and prophets of Israel who, it was believed, had prepared the way; and the efforts and sufferings of the many saints whose sacrifices had established, bulwarked, and testified to the Church.

Religion, however, was by no means the sole preoccupation of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. However devout, it was also a very worldly time. From liege lord to peasant and shepherd, for man and woman alike, hunting was a passion—with hawk, hound or ferret, spear or bow, a horse or a foot, after any prey from the noble stag to the scuttling hare; and this is commemorated in some of the finest and most famous tapestries of this period. The sport, moreover, turned readily into other out-of-door festivities: meals fit for hungry men unworried by corpulence, with whole animals roasted over the fire and gold flagons of wine that

the little pages could only just lift. Some of the party were sure to have musical instruments—usually pipes and lutes—and everybody sang. The peasants might entertain with a characteristic dance. A chance encounter with gypsies at once enticed to fortune telling. Meanwhile my lord and lady were not bashful in their amorous dalliance. All this is recorded on the tapestries, and provides great show of color and design, for hunting in those days imposed no severe uniform of riding habit, but was enjoyed in the richest fripperies—velvet, brocades and fur, plumes and jewels.

Thus the weavers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (often called in respect to tapestries, the "Gothic" period), first in Paris and then in the Lowland cities that were the centers (chiefly Tournai and Brussels), pictured alike their creed and their contemporaries; but almost equally important were the heroes of knightly adventure, who embodied in their gallantry, verging indeed at moments on brutality, the secular creed. Alexander and Julius Caesar, converted into exponents of mediaeval chivalry, King Arthur, Roland, and a host of their like waged their battles in a tumultuous clash of arms on armour over the woven walls of hundreds of great halls, and some scores of these pieces have come down to us. Christ brought not peace but the sword, war was a gentleman's profession, his road not only to glory but also to material gains, and, when things got a bit dull, his diversion. Hence he delighted to be surrounded by records of conflict depicted with the precision of the experienced and un-sparing realism.

It was a great moment in a great art. Here are mural paintings, but rendered in a material that gives

them more of warmth, the actual movement of soft hangings, and the practical advantage of being transportable. Nor do this flexibility and mobility damage their architectonic form and vigor. A fine tapestry of this period in its proper setting is part of the building, supplementing the structural design. The masses of figures pile up in a solid supporting wall articulated by the columns and arches that subdivide and frame the scenes, while the thick softness of the texture throws into relief the mechanical rigidity of the surrounding stone. Partners and then successors to stained glass windows, tapestries enjoy all the merits of that art except translucency and compensate for this lack by a greater intimacy and the possibility of more variable scale.

### III

But no moment lasts, least of all the great ones. The Renaissance, that expansion, in both time and space, of man's interests, came late to the north, but it did seriously affect tapestries after 1515. The ideals of Apollo and the Roman pantheon subtly altered the delineation of Christ and His Apostles, designed by the famed Raphael to be woven in Brussels for Pope Leo X. Hitherto tapestry personages had been colored drawings, in almost flat outline rendition, striking silhouettes that would carry the length of a vast hall, but filled in and surrounded by a great multiplicity of minute details to be explored in the long leisure of days that knew neither commercial nor mechanical amusement. Bright but substantial, the colors reflected the warmth and solidity of the woolen material, and design, color, and material combined to give that feeling of protective enclosure which is a home. But now

daringly modelled life-sized figures washed with pale tints stood in an empty world, bathed in light and air, the woven material almost forgotten in the pride of competence that could so faithfully translate a painting and its illusions. Within a short time the tapestry designers themselves were competing to put onto the loom exaggerated Roman sculpture, with huge members and inflated muscles; and to enhance the modeling and the freedom of sun and air, silk more and more supplemented the wool, creating lustrous highlights and the pale tones of a remote fading distance. No longer were the walls a shelter and retreat, but far vistas opened on every hand. It had its merits and its faults, the new style, and both were inevitable since time is change; but no one can deny its skill.

The trend was set, and the next generations could only follow. Within a century Rubens reinvigorated the Classical forms, too long standardized, with the hearty Flemish enjoyment of the world's good things. Flowers became larger and more resplendent, fruits rounder and more luscious; fabrics paraded their sheen or velvety flexibility; flesh was more fulsome, seductive and satiny. The Eucharist triumphed in a resounding series of cartoons from his industrious studio, but the glory was to the power and gloss of well groomed heavy Flemish horses, the pendent weight of flower and fruit swags, the yielding plumpness of rosy cupids, sensuous abundance and almost excessive health.

#### IV

Paralleling these metamorphoses were modifications in the simpler decorative cartoons. At first frankly woven materials with the flowering plants scattered up and down their height and breadth, at the opening of the sixteenth century the new found interest in realistic scenes and distant views prompted the introduction of a strip of landscape across the top: rolling hills dotted with conventional tufts of grass, broken by a castle or two, or perhaps a yeoman farmer's half-timbered, thatched house. Then the plants got larger until there were giant geraniums and stocks were jungle weeds. Unobtrusive birds and animals had wandered about the earlier meadows, but now there were whole menageries—in one type, created apparently in Tournai, controlled within a circular fence, either wattled, or, more characteristically, of elaborately carved, not to say tortured stone rendered in red. These designs reflected the Renaissance only indirectly, in its tendency towards greater scale and complication, but a direct heritage from Classicism is evident in another style (chiefly, it would seem, from Brussels) where acanthus plants, so long architectural and sculptural, become botanical, and twist, fleshy and deeply serrated, the full height of the panel. "Cabbages," they have been called, but "artichokes" would grant them more justice as well as dignity, for they are usually in the light, grayish blue green of the true artichoke.

Meanwhile the landscape conception, at first so timidly introduced in the upper register, had taken full possession, and woodland scenes in light clear green are flooded with the sunlight of yellow silk as the trees open out into gracious glades, disclosing a translucent



blue pond with swans afloat, or a castle with formal plots, or mounted hunters, introducing in their costumes a brave dash of red.

In the seventeenth century the trees get larger and darker. In the Renaissance you looked at the forest. Now you are in its midst, shadows enfolding, glimpses stretching away to trees and more trees; and this type continues through the eighteenth century.

Another distinctive contribution of the seventeenth century which continued well into the eighteenth, was the peasant scenes associated with the Flemish painters, father and son, named Teniers. Peasants were no novelty in tapestry. In the fifteenth century they often appear at the outdoor fêtes of the gentry, and sometimes usurp the entire scene. The sixteenth had a popular peasant romance celebrating the affairs of Gombaut and Macé in eight or ten panels, explained with doggerel quatrains. But these were all pastorals, versions of the landscape tapestry with figures. The two Teniers presented the town life of the lower classes—their roystering at taverns, the brawls and licentiousness and comedy of their holidays, with countless tiny figures in a multitude of episodes among realistic buildings.

## V

Slowly, during this sequence of adjustments to fashion, the Lowlands were yielding their preëminent place. In the early sixteenth century, King Francis I of France had established looms in his palace at Fontainebleau. These wove only for the royal use, but in the seventeenth century state shops were inaugurated in an old factory in Paris known as the Gobelins, and a commercial enterprise, later also taken over by the state, was producing at Beauvais. In the eighteenth century these and a factory for less expensive qualities at Aubusson really dominated the market, though the Lowlands, especially Brussels, never ceased to produce; and throughout the history of the art, other countries—Italy, England, Holland, Germany, and eventually Russia and Spain—had their more or less sporadic enterprises.

The French taste of the eighteenth century in tapestries as in everything else, was gay, delicate, superficial, sophisticated. The cynicism of the too experienced and too intelligent exploited perfection of skill and exquisite justness of judgment to the exaltation of futility. Pretty women existed for allure and elegance, and they determined the setting and manners of life. Boucher was their master and their slave, and he designed for the tapestry looms, imposing intricately graded pastel tones, dainty figures, refinement, and virtuosity's disregard for the quality and limitations of the material and the craft. To wall panels, now usually in relatively small scale convenient for intimate drawing rooms, are added furniture covers of which the most famous, by the adroit animal painter Oudry, il-

lustrate the Fables of La Fontaine derived from Aesop.

All this excess of grace marked the end of the art. Looms were still strung and bobbins passed throughout the nineteenth century because the looms were there and the subsidies were on the Government books. Other reasons there were none, for artistically the results were almost unvaryingly deplorable. Towards the close of the period the theoretical and sentimental desire to revive handicrafts inspired William Morris to establish the Merton Abbey looms, but neither theory nor sentimentality makes for a sound or enduring art and the tapestries are a just measure of these motives—technically adequate, and no more.

## VI

Of recent years modernists, disregarding the fact that they exist as propagandists for mechanical industry, have made designs for tapestry, the very type of the pre-mechanical craft, including some of their most mechanistic constructions. But fads are short, trivial ripples in history which is so long.

So long, but if itself endless, by no means endless in any one particular strand. Tapestry, as a technique and as an art, was the product of a handcraft which in a machine age can only be too artificially sustained. Yet though its production is no longer normal to our scheme of life, the enjoyment of those which time has mercifully left still is. For our ancestors, however different their ways, are still ourselves. Houses and tools, dresses, vehicles, speech, and even the gods themselves suffer change; but certain values of beauty, charm, integrity and insight go on; and these greet us

again, in many guises and degrees, in the storied hangings of five centuries.

Tapestry weaving had already been fully perfected in Egypt 1500 years before Christ, and as the centuries passed it spread over a large part of the world. The inhabitants of Egypt used it for nearly three thousand years, usually with linen warps, and first wool, then silk wefts, to insert patterned panels and bands in their sheer linen garment materials. Persia found the technique valuable more often for heavier fabrics, first wool and then silk wall hangings or, far more common, floor coverings; and down to the present day nomads there have used the weave in wool to make the flat rugs which are called in the Western world *khilims*. At the opposite extreme in texture are the very thin silk tapestries that the Chinese have made for some 1500 years for wall panels or clothes and called *K'ssu*. And meanwhile, on the other side of the globe, populations in Peru before the Spanish conquest, before even the civilization of the rich Incas whom the Spanish conquered and despoiled, were using this same craft in cotton and wool, for clothes, wall hangings, and burial robes; but whence, how, or at what time they learned it is still fiercely argued by the learned.

## VII

The term "tapestry" is often popularly used for a kind of wool (or silk) embroidery on canvas which completely covers the surface with what professionals call the "tent" stitch, half of a cross-stitch, ideally all in the same direction. But accurately used, "tapestry" means a kind of weave. True tapestry is woven like plain cloth (an ordinary handkerchief, for instance), with the weft thread passing alternately over and under the warps, and in the next passage back, under where before it went over, and vice versa, just as in darning. But whereas in a handkerchief all the threads extend the entire way from one side to the other, in tapestry the weft threads, which are of many different colors according to the pattern, each cover only that area where the particular color is required. If a lady in a red dress is shown against a green background, the bobbin carrying the red thread is turned back at the edge of the figure, and that carrying the green is turned back in the opposite direction. This means first, that when the red dress is completed the red weft is abandoned. In European tapestries it is usually just broken off and the loose end is left hanging on the back. And in the second place, it means that neither the red nor the green weft crosses the outline between the two colors; consequently, where an outline follows the straight line between two warps, there will be a slit in the fabric. In most European tapestries, up to a late period, these slits were simply sewed up after the weaving was complete.

The weaver may use either of two kinds of looms:

vertical (*haute lisse*), or horizontal (*basse lisse*). The one is a great frame, as wide as the tapestry is to be high, with rollers at either end so that the finished weaving can be rolled up while a new area of warp is rolled down from the top, putting the work always at a convenient level. The weaver stands or sits before this and separates his warps with his hand as he passes his bobbins in and out. The horizontal loom is similarly a frame supplied with rollers to keep the work within easy reach, but, as the name denotes, it is laid flat like a table. This has the advantage of permitting the use of foot treadles to separate the warps. Every alternate warp (the first, third, fifth, etc.) is attached, by long loops of thread (the *lisses* of the French term) to one bar, which when pressed down with the left foot draws back that set of warps so that the bobbin can be slid along in front of them. The other set (the second, fourth, sixth, etc. warps) is connected in the same way with the right treadle. Thus in weaving, first one and then the other foot is pushed down.

The loom is as wide as the tapestry is to be high (and not, as might be expected, as *high* as the hanging is to be high) because in the finished work the warps run, not vertically, as they do in satins, damasks, and other shuttle-woven materials, but horizontally. To be sure they could run vertically, but in a heavy fabric this would make a series of marked ridges that would tend to slice up the figures, whereas when those same little ridges and the minute shadows that they cast run horizontally they tie the design together. In order to have the warps horizontal, however, the pattern is

turned half way around, at right angles on the loom as the weaver executes it. This makes his task more difficult; nor does it help that he must weave from the back so that he always sees his figures as if in a looking glass.

Before the weaver begins his work, the small cartoon (*petit patron*, in French) is made, a black and white drawing setting forth all the main figures in full detail, and this then has to be rendered on great linen sheets in the full size of the finished hanging, complete with all the colors and minute patterns (*grand patron*). To aid him, the weaver may have the main outlines of his figures traced on the white warps when they are stretched taut on the loom. With the horizontal loom he can also lay the full sized cartoon under the warps, seeing it between the strings as he interprets it. But this advantage is largely counterbalanced by the fact that he cannot see the face of his finished weaving, though he circumvents this somewhat by examining it in a mirror. The weaver using the vertical loom, on the other hand, can see all his finished work, if he wishes to unroll it, merely by walking around to the back of his loom. He can guide himself in weaving, however (aside from the outlines drawn on the warps), only by glancing at the full-scale cartoon hanging to one side.

In many tapestries, including all those from the European looms, there is shading to give roundness to a face or form, suppleness to draperies. This is done by using two tones of the color and fitting them together in striations like the teeth of a comb, but vary-

ing in length and thickness. Lustrous silk introduced into this shading as high-lights increases the modelling, and very sumptuous tapestries were sometimes further enriched with metal thread.

So the weaver, sitting at his loom, hour after hour, day after day, passing back and forth his brightly-wound shuttles to build up blocks of different hues, creates in the end a picture, warm and soft but vital and magnificent, something greater than those who wrought upon it, and of far longer life.



**When you have finished each paragraph in this booklet, try to find a tapestry, or a picture of a tapestry that illustrates it.**

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\*Dr. Ackerman is the author of "Wallpaper, Its History, Design, and Use," and "Tapestry, the Mirror of Civilization," and has compiled the catalogs of several private collections of tapestries.

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