In the grandiose age of Louis XIV, “Gobelins” and “tapestry” were synonymous. The sumptuous hangings which made weaving one of the major arts in the seventeenth century were nearly all of Gobelins workmanship. Conspicuous among the varied elements forming the grand tapestry style of the age of the Sun King was the personality of Charles Lebrun, who not only held the post of director of the Gobelins manufactory, but designed cartoons for many of its most important tentures. Under his autocratic rule, the eminence of the Gobelins was such that by contrast the royal manufactory at Beauvais, fine as were its productions, seemed of second magnitude.

Strong tradition often dies a belated death. Although Lebrun left the Gobelins in 1690, the manufactory continued to function well up to the middle of the following century just as if he were still at the helm. France of the rococo period, however, had little real liking for the inflated Lebrun version of tapestry elegance. When, accordingly, the Beauvais manufactory began to weave designs which expressed not the ponderous histories of a Queen Esther or a Mark Anthony, but the gay fêtes and pastorals of the new age, they created a sensation at once.

Beauvais’ swift ascendency, like that of the Gobelins, was due to the genius of one man—François Boucher (1703-1770)—who for twenty years produced tapestry designs of enduring freshness and charm. Just as Lebrun had established the tapestry style for France of the baroque age, Boucher set its form for the rococo period. So great was his influence that the year of his arrival in Beauvais, 1736, marks one of the turning points in the story of tapestry design.

Although Boucher’s paintings and drawings are well known—and adored or despised, depending on one’s point of view—his tapestries may be his most impressive memorial. For in this art his spirit is always sympathetically revealed. And with good reason, since Boucher—the son of a designer of embroidery—possessed an extraordinary inventive talent which enabled him to dominate easily the surface of the largest hanging. He even made this tremendously difficult task seem simple. Then, too, the silk and wool of tapestry proved admirable mediums for one who as a designer had ever reveled in opulence of surface, whether of fabric, foliage, or flesh itself.

Since Frenchmen seemed to realize intuitively that Boucher tapestries epitomized their age, it was no wonder that the various sets he designed were repeated time and again on the looms to the great profit of all concerned. In 1736 Boucher began the sketches for the set called Les Fêtes Italiennes, or Les Fêtes de Village à l’Italienne, which finally ran to fourteen subjects. These were reproduced innumerable times at Beauvais, sometimes as sets, sometimes as separate hangings. No less successful were Boucher’s other series, L’Histoire de Psyché, Les Amours des Dieux, Fragments d’Opéra, Les Beaux Pastorales, and La Tenture Chinoise.

During these crowded years at Beauvais, the Gobelins manufactory, although more favored by Bourbon gold than was its rival, looked on enviously from the sidelines. Finally the Gobelins management took action and, in the manner of a prosperous but faltering ball club of the present day, attempted to scotch enemy opposition by purchasing the very talent that was so threatening. In 1755 Boucher went over to the Gobelins, but he left his masterly designs behind at Beauvais. At the Gobelins, his new compositions were for the most part used as medallions set into decorative frameworks of the greatest elaboration. The result, seen in the series known as Les Tentures de François Boucher, was a plethora of excellent ornament (designed by Maurice Jacques and Louis Tes-
La Danse, a Beauvais tapestry from a design by François Boucher (1703-1770)

sier), but with little of Boucher. Only the Beauvais looms seemed fully to catch his spirit.

The Beauvais phase of Boucher's accomplishment is well illustrated by a charming tapestry recently presented to the Museum by Mrs. W. Bayard Cutting. It is said to have come from the Petit Trianon, and its subject—La Danse—indicates that it is from the series of the Fêtes Italiennes. But it is Italian in name only, for the feathery landscape is as French as the Gardens of Versailles, and the precocious adolescents who so gaily romp in it would only be at home in such a Gallic setting. Woven in reverse into the tapestry are the date of manufacture, 1756, and Boucher's signature. Whether or not one agrees with the Goncourts in coupling “la vulgarité élégante” with the signature of Boucher, no name is needed to enable one to recognize the artist of this tapestry, for in its animated and breathless composition it is surely in Boucher's most characteristic manner. And it may be added that the skill shown in the weaving is equally typical of the highest Beauvais craftsmanship. The tapestry does not give Boucher's complete design, which we know to have had additional figures at either side; rather it places all emphasis upon the chief group, that of the dancers. It is precisely what a balletomane of the era of La Pompadour might have ordered.