Few but Choice:

SOME RECENT ACCESSIONS OF EUROPEAN TEXTILES

by EDITH A. STANDE\textsuperscript{N} Associate Curator, Textiles

There is a certain similarity between a great museum and an iceberg. The latter's towering mass above the water line is balanced, we are told, by a vastly greater, unseen bulk of ice below. So, in a museum like the Metropolitan, the cynosures, the superlative works of art never removed from public view, are far exceeded in number by the humbler objects that have their place in a comprehensive collection but do not remain on permanent exhibition. The simile cannot be pressed very far, since the iceberg grows smaller as it floats along, while a museum's collections are continually being added to; what is perhaps not always realized is that these additions are so numerous that only a small fraction of them can ever be shown at one time in the galleries. In study rooms and storerooms the rest wait for their moment of usefulness; they will emerge for a traveling scholar, a special exhibition, a designer looking for an idea, a writer needing an illustration, a committee selecting Christmas card subjects, a museum requesting a loan, or even for that rarest of visitors, the enthusiast who likes to feast his eyes on a little-known beautiful object.

To the Department of Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Art come all works of art not paintings, prints, arms and armor, musical instruments, or costumes, that were made in Europe from the end of the Middle Ages to the present day. Here is almost every material used by man, from alabaster to zinc; here are most of the techniques he has invented and all the variations in style of five hundred years and a score of countries. Small wonder that this department grows in riches yearly through generous gifts and bequests, as well as purchases made possible by equally generous donations of funds.

One section of this huge department contains textiles; since 1953 there have been over four hundred additions to this single collection, not counting the eight hundred samplers bequeathed by Mrs. Lathrop Colgate Harper in 1957 and commented on in this Bulletin in November 1958. Many of these acquisitions went at once onto gallery walls or into cases on permanent display; the remainder are available to all in the Textile Study Room, but they have actually been seen by very few people. Thirty-eight of them, however, are now on temporary exhibition in a ground floor gallery at the north end of the Museum.

The pieces exhibited range in date from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century; they are made of metal thread, silk, wool, linen, and cotton; their patterns were formed by weaving, by embroidery, and by printing, in Italy, France, Spain, and England. Each has some special interest that has given it its place among this very select company now on display. The printed cottons that fill a case with glorious red and were produced so cheaply in France and England in the late eighteenth century show a perfection of engraving and reproduction that no modern imitations can approach; their patterns, with subjects taken from contemporary history or drama, or merely decorative, throw an interest-

\textbf{Fig. 1.} Half chasuble, composed of two panels of brocaded red velvet with a gold ground and parts of the design in loops of gold thread, and an embroidered orphrey in gold thread and colored silks showing Saints Lucy and Barbara. Italian, the velvet XV century, the orphrey XVI century. Height 49 1/2 inches

Rogers Fund, 1956, and gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916
ing light on the tastes of our ancestors in interior decoration. Elsewhere a silk embroidery, rivaling a peacock’s tail in its multitude of colors, is a superb example of smooth stitchery, and a bold woolen one shows what can be achieved with a coarse material and a strong design. Whether made for use as altar frontals or chair seats, ceremonial banners or bed curtains, these textiles now appear divorced from utility, works of art (though minor) in their own right.

The earliest piece on exhibition is an Italian pomegranate velvet (Figure 1) of the fifteenth century. The Museum is very rich in these sumptuous fabrics, thick with gold, which so often form a backdrop to a Madonna or clothe a saint in Flemish paintings, but no museum could ever have too many; they represent the art of the weaver at one of its highest peaks. When received, this new example was in two halves coarsely stitched together, the great, flowing design cramped and nullified; by taking the pieces apart and placing a suitable orphrey between them, the original form of a chasuble has been restored and each swinging stem with its pomegranate fruit can be seen to launch itself upward with all its old freedom and glory.

Another masterpiece of the loom was woven three hundred years later, a Lyon brocaded satin with a typically rococo chinoiserie design (Figure 2). The Museum has owned two fragments of this pattern for over twenty years, one with a large vase and a bird, the other with the Chinese couple; though the complete design is known from a length of the brocade in the Musée des Tissus in Lyon, it was hard to understand how two such disparate motifs could be successfully juxtaposed. The daring and ingenuity of the designer can now be appreciated in this seven-foot panel; this is the actual length of the complete design repeat, a prodigious undertaking on a drawloom.

Fifteenth century velvets and eighteenth century brocades, though among the most desirable of fabrics, are comparatively common—at least in great museums. Far rarer are shaped tapestries, that is, objects tapestry-woven on a loom to a particular configuration for a specific purpose. There are two such pieces in this small display. One is a horse trapping (Figure 3), known as a peytrelle, the gift of James Hazen Hyde. Nothing could be more explicit than the decoration on this object in announcing the name and rank of its original owner; the arms (or, a cross gules, cantoned by sixteen allerions azure), the angel supporters, the ducal coronet, the motto (“Dieu aide au premier baron chrétien”), the battle cry (Aplanos, Greek for “Steadily”), the blue birds scattered over the pale yellow ground, the initial “M”—all stand for the head of the Montmorency family, who bore the proud appellation of the first of Christian barons. When this tapestry was made, the holder of the title was probably Anne-Léon I, who succeeded his father as duke in 1750 and died in 1785. There are no marks to indicate where it was woven, though presumably it was in France; the style

*Fig. 2. Detail from a panel of brocaded silk, showing a Chinese musician and a lady with a birdcage. French (Louis XV), xvIII century. Length of complete panel 6 feet 11 inches
Rogers Fund, 1956*
of the angels suggests Beauvais. Tapestry horse trappings are exceedingly rare; Polish and Dutch examples have been published, and a French piece in the Cleveland Museum of Art, of a shape somewhat similar to that of the Metropolitan Museum's peytrelle, has angel supporters, to an unidentified coat of arms, of much the same type. An eighteenth century painting in the Harrach Gallery, Vienna (illustrated in Alte und moderne Kunst for April 1960, page 15) shows a horse wearing an embroidered peytrelle.

Even more unusual and very much harder to place is a great tapestry-woven cape or mantle (Figure 4), nearly eight feet across and five feet deep. The ground is white silk on which are silhouetted a series of pink medallions, each containing a symbol of the Virgin outlined in gold thread. Rocaille scrolls of pink and gold or blue and gold, foliage in bright greens, fat red and white roses, and other flowers in red, yellow, and blue swirl along the border and down the center. The general effect is one of high-keyed brilliance very remarkable in a tapestry. No human being could have worn this mantle with its thirteen heavenly attributes (sun, moon, star, tower, mirror, cedar, lily, fountain, and others less easily decipherable); it must have been made for a statue of the Madonna. When and where? Certainly in the eighteenth century, at a time when the baroque was lightening into the rococo, and
perhaps in Italy, where several tapestry factories are known to have specialized in small ecclesiastical pieces at this time. However, a leading authority on Italian tapestries has stated that the cape is more probably of French manufacture.

So far all the textiles discussed have been professional work, but the amateur is well represented. Embroidery, simpler than the extremely skilled crafts of drawloom or tapestry weaving, has always been the favorite technique of the industrious lady of leisure. In the eighteenth century she existed in large numbers; Lady Mary Wortley Montagu once wrote, “I think it is as scandalous for a woman not to know how to use a needle, as for a man not to know how to use a sword.” Sometimes she made a useful chair seat, as the poet William Cowper put it,

and other birds, especially the little ones, his potential victims, gang up on him to mock and scold. The panel now on exhibition, bequeathed to the Museum by Alexandrine Sinsheimer, is in silk tent stitch on canvas; it shows peacocks, swallows, tits, a cockatoo, a parrot, a kingfisher, a magpie, an oriole, a house sparrow, and a carrion crow, together with less clearly differentiated birds, surrounding a large owl. The owl, with claw firmly fixed on an avian corpse, seems nevertheless very much master of the situation.

This subject was a favorite one with medieval artists like the carvers of misericords in English churches. It is one of the few such representations of wild creatures in action that seem to have a basis in fact: an owl in the daytime is often accompanied by a flock of noisy and agitated small birds. In the Middle Ages, as might be expected, an allegorical meaning was attached to

Fig. 4. Mantle for a statue of the Virgin, tapestry-woven in wool, silk, and metal thread. Italian, 1700-1750. Height 4 feet 9 inches Rogers Fund, 1957

Sometimes her work was a purely decorative picture. One such shown here (Figure 5), represents an age-old subject, the “mobbed owl.” A terror by night, so the legend goes, the owl is purblind by day, and the other birds, especially the little ones, his potential victims, gang up on him to mock and scold. The panel now on exhibition, bequeathed to the Museum by Alexandrine Sinsheimer, is in silk tent stitch on canvas; it shows peacocks, swallows, tits, a cockatoo, a parrot, a kingfisher, a magpie, an oriole, a house sparrow, and a carrion crow, together with less clearly differentiated birds, surrounding a large owl. The owl, with claw firmly fixed on an avian corpse, seems nevertheless very much master of the situation.

This subject was a favorite one with medieval artists like the carvers of misericords in English churches. It is one of the few such representations of wild creatures in action that seem to have a basis in fact: an owl in the daytime is often accompanied by a flock of noisy and agitated small birds. In the Middle Ages, as might be expected, an allegorical meaning was attached to
the story, the owl being said to represent the sinner jeered at by the righteous; we can be fairly sure, however, that no such moral lesson was in the mind of the maker of this panel. It is curious to find this typically medieval subject used at so late a date, but there is an early eighteenth century Gobelins sofa back that shows the same scene.

A mixed collection of objects like these textiles cannot, of course, be arranged to illustrate the history of styles or techniques, or, indeed, to have any didactic purpose. It is intended only to give pleasure to the eye and mind, to draw attention to the beauty and interest of some minor works of art, to illustrate the continuing growth of the Museum in one small field, and to express gratitude to the donors who so generously make this growth possible.