The Treaty of Paris was signed on February 10, 1763, bringing the Seven Years’ War to an end as far as France and England were concerned. Though England had been strikingly successful in the conflict, many Englishmen had been seriously discommoded: for years it had been extraordinarily difficult to obtain passports for France. Even as important a person as the Duke of Grafton, when he wished to visit the Continent in 1761, was obliged to call on the good offices of a French marquis then a prisoner of war in England. When the Duke reached Geneva he was unable to take full advantage of the fact that several agreeable members of the French aristocracy were then in the city; “a foolish etiquette,” he wrote later, “prevented us from visiting directly each other, while our countries were at war; but we were not prevented from interchanging every possible attention and civility.”

A commoner, George Selwyn, also managed to cross the Channel before peace was restored. His sinecures (one of which gave him the title Clerk of the Irons and Surveyor of the Meltings of the Mint) did not, of course, require him to remain in England, and he went over in September 1762, escorting the wife of the English ambassador extraordinary then in Paris negotiating the peace settlement. When Selwyn returned in November his friend Horace Walpole quoted him as saying that “our passion for everything French is nothing to theirs for everything English,” and by April of the following year so many of these truly civilized people had taken advantage of their freedom to travel that Walpole wrote, using words appropriate to a country dance, “The two nations are crossing over and figuring-in.”

But August was then, as now, the tourist season for the British; by that month in 1763 Walpole was writing: “The French do not arrive in such shoals as we do at Paris; there are no fewer than five English duchesses there, Ancaster, Richmond, Bridgewater, Hamilton, and Douglas.” He does not mention anyone of lower rank (or even the dukes), but we know that the sixth Earl of Coventry was also among the English visitors. He, however, had come with a purpose, and a fortunate chance has preserved a record of what that purpose was. George Selwyn was in Paris again in July 1763, and his friend “Gilly” Williams wrote to him from London: “Cov. is returned to town; he . . . talks of setting out for France . . . His errand is to buy furniture, [and] to talk of tapestry and [looking] glasses.” On August 4 Gilly reports Lord Coventry’s intentions again: “He talks of setting out next week for Paris, and is now hiring a French servant to pay his post-horses. Don’t think of introducing him to any part of the great world, for he is determined to be as private as an upholsterer, and to pass his time in buying glasses and tapestry.”

It must be remembered that the word “upholsterer” had wider connotations in the eighteenth century than it does today; Johnson’s definition is, “one who furnishes houses; one who fits up apartments with beds and furniture,” and a writer in 1747 said that the upholsterer was “a Connoisseur in every article that belongs to a house.” Coventry, then, was in Paris to exercise his good taste, of which he was apparently proud; Gilly says, in a letter of 1766: “I told Coventry that he and Count Caylus [the great French patron of the arts and classical enthusiast, who had just died] were joined together as to the standard of taste, and he made me repeat it ten times.”

The Earl’s purchases—tapestries and furni-
tuous—remained for over a hundred years among the glories of his country seat, Croome Court. William Dean, "Botanic Gardener to the Right Hon. the Earl of Coventry," published *An historical and descriptive account of Croome d’Abitot* in 1824: though the gardens were naturally his first concern, he wrote of the "Tapestry Room": "This most beautiful room is hung, with the finest tapestry now in England. It is of the Gobelin line manufacture. The ground is crimson, ornamented with coloured figures—emblematic of the four elements. It is marked with the names of the two artists—Boucher, who designed—and Neilson, who executed it. The furniture corresponds with the hanging: and the mirrors, in this, as well as in most of the apartments, are superb." Today, thanks to the generosity of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, these tapestries can be admired on the walls and the furniture of the Croome Court room in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In this room, and in most of the others like it still in England, the visitor’s first, immediate, overwhelming impression is of being suddenly engulfed in a crimson sea. From chair rail to ceiling cornice the room is apparently covered with a red, flowered damask; the effect is produced in tapestry by the use of two tones simulating the contrasting areas of the two weaves in a single-colored silk damask. Elaborate gilt frames, all in tapestry, mark off the separate areas: the long wall with the fireplace, and the two end walls; the narrower spaces between the doors and the window wall, and on either side of the windows; the oblongs over the doors, and the spaces around the mirror that hangs between the windows. Each section has its tapestry panel. On the three large hangings a wealth of flowers, animals, and birds proliferates over the top of the lower frame. On the fireplace side we see a squirrel, a golden pheasant, and two macaws, as well as a dead duck and other game-bird corpses; on the end walls the ungainly form of a purple gallinule and several pigeons. From the upper frame hang swags and pendants of flowers. Flowers, in fact, are everywhere: red, pink, yellow, and white roses, pink and purple tulips, yellow hollyhocks and lilies, poppies, crown imperials, peonies, lilacs, carnations, and many more in many colors, but all in harmony with the glorious, all-pervading crimson, or very deep pink, of the background. Flowers ornament the red "damask" of the furniture covers, tied into bunches on the backs of the two sofas and the six armchairs (each chair with different designs), casually scattered on the seats. Botticelli’s Primavera is not more beflowered than are the tapestries of the Croome Court room.
But this profusion of ornamental detail is not bewildering and is not allowed to dominate the main compositions; it is relegated to a secondary place by the great oval medallions which apparently hang from the upper frames of the three large panels. These too are in simulated gilt frames, wreathed with flowers above and sharply distinguished from the damask ground, on which, indeed, they cast imitation shadows. The upright ovals on the fireplace wall show scenes from the stories of Aurora and Cephalus and of Vertumnus and Pomona. Aurora, goddess of the dawn, is seen with the morning star in her hair, reclining on clouds and gazing at her sleeping lover. Vertumnus, god of spring and of orchards, in the form of an old woman, converses earnestly with Pomona. A watering can and a basket of flowers at her feet indicate her patronage of gardens. These two scenes symbolize the elements of Air and Earth; the second panel is signed “F. Bouché. P.” On the south wall (as the room is oriented in the Museum) the scene on the single, horizontal oval medallion stands for Fire; it shows Venus, with Cupid at her side, descending from her chariot to visit her husband Vulcan in his smithy. Two of his one-eyed workmen, Cyclopes, are seen at the forge behind him. Water is illustrated on the opposite wall by the story of Neptune and Amymone. Amymone, resting after the hunt, is shown with her bow and quiver beside her; a satyr whom she had wounded, his goat leg clearly visible, has grasped her arm, but he has seen Neptune leaping to the rescue from his horse-drawn chariot and is about to flee. This medallion is also signed: “Boucher Pix.” On the damask ground of the panel, in the lower right-hand corner, is written “Neilson. ex.”

The “Boucher pinxit” of the medallions refers, of course, to François Boucher, who did so many designs for the tapestry manufactory at Beauvais; several of these entrancing hangings are in the Metropolitan Museum. They were all, however, designed at an earlier date than the Croome Court tapestries, which were made at the Royal Gobelins Manufactory. This famous establishment was the Manufacture royale des Meubles de la Couronne. It had been set up by Louis XIV in 1662 in what had originally been a dye works, owned by a family called Gobelin, in a south-eastern suburb of Paris. Here, until the difficult
years of the 1690s, vast quantities of superb decorations for the King’s palaces were made, including tapestries, metalwork, and furniture of all kinds. After 1700 only tapestries were produced, but these continued to be of the finest possible quality. It was in 1754 that the heads of the workshops of this institution asked to have Boucher associated with their enterprise; they said that the weavers of Beauvais had been supported for nearly twenty years by the graceful paintings he had supplied, and “whether their works are good or bad, the private individual, who is not much of a connoisseur, will always prefer novelty, and will be satisfied with subjects composed by, and showing the taste of, Sieur Boucher.” “It is a matter,” they continue in a letter to their supervisor, “of preserving the Royal Gobelins Manufactory in its ancient glory, and that it may ever retain the superiority it has always had in this field over other manufactories.” Their wish was granted in the following year, when Boucher was appointed surinspecteur. The Marquis de Marigny (brother of Mme de Pompadour) then held the position of Directeur des Bâtiments, which involved the supervision of the royal manufactories; he wrote to the artist that he would be expected to visit the factory weekly, when he should give advice and direct the work “with that goodness and urbanity so necessary to Great Masters of Art.” The Marquis added that he was counting on Boucher to produce paintings for the manufactory, “where you will see them exe-

*The Venus and Vulcan tapestry on one of the end walls*
height of his career (he became First Painter to the King in 1765), was far too successful and occupied with other commissions to provide many designs for the Gobelins. But he did paint, as regular easel pictures, the four scenes in the medallions of the Croome Court tapestries; the canvases are in the Louvre and at the Grand Trianon, two dated 1763 and one 1764. Other works of his were used on later weavings of similar tapestries, so that all the examples of the same general design are known as the “Tentures de François Boucher.”

The other name, “Neilson,” on the Neptune hanging, is less well known than Boucher’s, but it is that of a most interesting man. He was Jacques Neilson, head of the horizontal loom (basse lisse) workshop of the Gobelins. In the mid-eighteenth century, the manufactory was composed of three workshops (ateliers), two with vertical looms (haute lisse) and one with horizontal ones. Each shop was under a man called the entrepreneur; the factory as a whole had a director, from 1755 Jean Germain Soufflot, the architect of the Panthéon. His superior was the Marquis de Marigny, who was responsible to the King. The entrepreneurs were what their name implies, but though they took the risks they had little of the freedom of those key figures in a capitalist economy. They bought the supplies and paid the workmen, at fixed piece rates, and theoretically obtained their profit from their chief customer the King, who reimbursed them, again at fixed prices per square ell, for the tapestries they produced. In practice he often had too many other uses for his money, especially in time of war. Through all the vast mass of documents concerning the Gobelins, as
published in Maurice Fenaille’s monumental *Etat Général de la Manufacture des Gobelins*, and in Jean Mondain-Monval’s *Correspondance de Soufflot*, runs the perpetual theme of the misery of the *entrepreneurs*. In 1758 Audran, head of one of the *haute lisse* shops, writes on behalf of himself and his numerous family; he is owed over 30,000 livres (ten livres a week was a good wage for a highly skilled craftsman) and has had to refuse several offers of marriage for his eldest daughter, already over twenty, because he has no savings. In the same year Soufflot begs Marigny for payments to the *entrepreneurs*; Marigny has to refuse him, the times being so unhappy, but forwards an account of the *situation affreuse* to the controller general. In 1760 the *entrepreneurs* are about to go under; every Saturday the weavers must be paid at least enough to ensure that they do not die of hunger at their looms, and there are no funds available to meet the payroll. A year later all Marigny can do is to advise Soufflot to read Montaigne and adopt his philosophy; Marigny has written again for money, but the *intendant des finances* is a nobody (*un enfant de la balle*). “It’s all very well, his being descended from the Counts of Boulogne; he’s the son of an artist.” (The nobleman perhaps forgets that he is writing to an architect.) Few people can have looked forward more eagerly to the end of the Seven Years’ War than the *entrepreneurs* of the Gobelins, and of the three, Neilson had the greatest reason to expect that his affairs would benefit from the coming of peace.

The chief justification for this confidence was the lower cost of *basse lisse* tapestries, about a third less than that of *haute lisse* works. They were thus more attractive to private purchasers; the factory had always catered to these as well as to

*Medallion symbolizing Fire, showing Venus visiting Vulcan at his forge*
the King, but the desperate state of the royal finances in the mid-eighteenth century made such customers the chief hope of the unhappy entrepreneurs. **Haute lisse** weaving was slow; the worker had to manipulate the warps with one hand and insert the wefts with the other, whereas the warps of the horizontal loom were raised and lowered by foot pedals, leaving both hands free and so speeding production. Traditionally, also, the **haute lisse** weaver selected his own colors from the supplies of wool and silk, this task, it was calculated, costing him a day’s time a week; in the **basse lisse atelier** the selection was made by the entrepreneur. Consequently the **haute lisse** tapestries took much longer to make and the weavers received more per square ell; they considered themselves vastly superior to their **basse lisse** colleagues and refused to let their sons be apprenticed to the horizontal looms.

Until Neilson took over the **basse lisse** shop the **haute lisse** tapestries had also been of much finer quality. This was chiefly because the **basse lisse** weavers, working on the wrong side of the fabric, could not see the right side unless they crawled under the loom; a weaver on an upright loom had only to step in front of it to find out just how his finished work would look. Another disadvantage of the horizontal loom was that the cartoons for this form of tapestry weaving were cut into strips about a yard wide and placed under the warps; the weaver looked between the warps and copied what he saw. This meant that the design was reproduced in reverse, mirror-image. The cartoons also wore out very quickly; all those that Boucher made for Beauvais, where only **basse lisse** looms were used, have disappeared for this reason. The cartoons were rolled up, as the work proceeded, with the completed portions of the weaving, and sometimes the paint came off on the tapestry. An **haute lisse** weaver had his cartoon hung behind him, with a tracing of the main outlines on the warps. All this was changed by Soufflot and Neilson. The former conceived the idea of a mechanism for raising the horizontal loom quickly to a vertical position, and his suggestion was given a practical form by the great engineer Jacques de Vaucanson. Soufflot brought the new loom to the factory in 1757 and wrote to Marigny that it was received with general approbation by the **basse lisse**, and even by the **haute lisse**, weavers—“a rare thing, and one that we did not entirely expect.” (When the idea had first been put to them, the **basse lisse** weavers had protested against an innovation that seemed to involve such hard manual labor; if a better way of making looms had been possible, they thought, it would have been discovered in the long history of the factory.) Now a tapestry at 230 livres a square ell would be as beautiful as one costing 360. Neilson, among his other efficacious and economical improvements, took the cartoons from underneath the warps and hung them behind the **basse lisse** weavers, replacing them with tracings on transparent paper, turned over so that the tapestry did not reverse the cartoon; no more swords would be brandished in left hands. Some twenty years later he received a substantial monetary reward from the King for this simple but ingenious device. Un-

*Medallion symbolizing Earth, showing Vertumnus with Pomona and signed "F. Bouché. P."*
fortunately it was scarcely adequate; when Neilson died in 1788, the King owed him 240,000 livres.

Thanks to these expedients Soufflot was able to fulfill the ambition he had expressed when he became director, that of making tapestries that would preserve the traditional superiority of the Gobelins but approach those of Beauvais in price. They would then, he wrote, “induce private individuals to provide themselves from one as from the other manufactory.” It was by “supporting the talents of Sieur Neilson” that he hoped to accomplish this, and indeed, when in 1757 Marigny, as a test, had some pieces woven in the same design on both types of looms, Neilson’s were judged to be as good as the haute lisse pieces, and even better in such details as flowers, feathers, and fur.

But the improved quality of these cheaper tapestries was of little use while the Seven Years’ War was in progress. Private buyers were scarce, and in any case few Frenchmen other than the King’s relatives could be expected to present themselves in this capacity. All eyes were turned to England, the home of the rich Milords. One of these had somehow managed to get an order in while the war was still raging; Soufflot wrote to Marigny in 1761 that Neilson had been commissioned by “Milord Foleys” to make four hangings of the Esther set for a London drawing room. He believed that the business should be concluded as quickly as possible—“it can bring us other orders after the peace.” The Esther cartoons were already in use on haute lisse looms; Marigny said that they must be transferred to Neilson’s shop and the workers employed elsewhere. The same cartoons could now be used indifferently on haute or basse lisse looms, as a result of Neilson’s device—another economy. From the factory records we learn that actually only one cartoon had to be moved, but the haute lisse tapestry reproducing it, begun in 1760, remained on the loom for seven years, even though it was being made for the King. The cash customer came first. Commissions, such as Lord Foleys’, for making new tapestries were, of course, what the entrepeneurs and the director most wanted, but there were a million livres worth of completed tapestries, the King’s property (though only partly paid for) in the Gobelins warehouse. These were used, from time to time, as royal presents; the manufactory was particularly pleased when they were given to ambassadors, who would take them abroad where they would be seen by possible future purchasers. But the King had an unfortunate habit of preferring to give his portrait in miniature, set in diamonds, and the tapestries, particularly the haute lisse ones, continued to accumulate. What was to be done?

Peace was finally proclaimed in February 1763. In April an English gentleman arrived to look over the manufactory, then, as now, one of the tourist sights of Paris. We can suppose that he asked the price of some of the finished tapestries, and we know that he was told he could have them at a reduced rate, though this previously unheard-of offer might not hold good for long; this, said Neilson, determined him, and he bought eight large hangings, basse lisse pieces of the Nouvelles Indes and Old Testament series. “This sale can bring others,” writes Marigny jubilantly to Soufflot. But a cut-rate sale of the King’s property had to have royal approval, and consequently Louis XV had on his working agenda for May 5, 1763 the item “Selling all the old Gobelins tapestries that can be disposed of.

Vertumnus and Pomona, by François Boucher, 1763. The Louvre Archives Photographiques
Bargain day at the Gobelins packed the customers in. Out went an old set of the Nouvelles Indes to "Mylord Tynley," and a Portières des Dieux to the Duke of Richmond—cash down (payé comptant). Mr. John Stewart bought both the same two sets, and the Duke also took a Don Quixote piece that was only a year old. The entrepreneurs were given a commission on these sales, and by the end of the year there were 1978 livres to be distributed. The financial calculations were extremely complicated, since the tapestries were sold, as they had been paid for, by the ell, and they had shrunk in the direction of the warps, that is, for most of them, in width. Soufflot wrote to Marigny that this always happened after a few years of storage; the truth of this observation was confirmed when the Croome Court tapestries were installed in the Metropolitan Museum, though the shrinkage had been slight.

On the more profitable sales of new tapestries commissioned by private individuals there is much less information available. The rules governing them were drawn up in 1754, as part of a Règlement pour la Manufacture Royale des Tapisseries des Gobelins: when tapestries were undertaken (entrepris) for the public, or foreign countries, all three entrepreneurs were to share the profits, half going to the man whose shop did the work and a quarter each to the other two; when one of them had opened negotiations for an order, he was bound to inform the director (no such reports have survived—perhaps they were made verbally), and also the other two entrepreneurs, who were then forbidden to queer his pitch (traverser son marché) by offering a lower price for the same work; all three could accept orders for both haute and basse lisse pieces, but if Neilson obtained an haute lisse commission it was to be carried out by both the others, half in one workshop and half in the other.

Neilson, as we have seen, might be expected to obtain more private commissions for his own shop, because his tapestries were just as good but cheaper; but why is he considered likely to receive orders for the more expensive haute lisse productions? It is probable that, where Englishmen were concerned, he had an advantage. As his name suggests, he was Scottish. In 1760 this caused him great concern because, as an alien, he could not inherit, he supposed, from a deceased uncle, a naturalized French subject; Marigny reminded him through Soufflot that, in accordance with the privileges granted at the foundation of the manufactory, he had acquired French citizenship after ten years of work there. He had had much more than this—eleven years as entrepreneur and eleven as a master weaver, to say nothing of his apprenticeship. "Ne serait-ce point une terreur panique dont le sieur Neilson est agité?" "Is he not alarming himself about nothing?" We know that six years as an apprentice and four as a journeyman were obligatory for the weavers, and no apprentice could be younger than six; Neilson must therefore have been born about 1722 at the latest. He had a daughter in 1743. Perhaps his father had fled Scotland after the failure of the Stuart rising in 1715? His extant letters, even those to English customers, are in French, but it seems very possible, considering the success he had with the Milords, that he at least spoke their language.

We can now imagine the scene when the single-minded Lord Coventry presented himself at the door of the Gobelins manufactory, one day in August 1763. By now the factory personnel were accustomed to English clients and had even found out how the fifty percent English customs duty could be circumvented by shipping the tapestries to the French ambassador in London. Coventry spoke very little French; Walpole, in his feline way, says it was "just enough to show how ill-bred he is." Neilson, therefore, must have been hurriedly sent for and the Earl taken on a conducted tour.

When a monarch came to the Gobelins, as did the King of Denmark in 1768, all the minutiae of his reception, down to the amount spent on the guard detail and the size of the tips he distributed, were recorded; tapestries were hung in the courtyard, and we know, for instance, that the Danish king fortunately left fifteen minutes before it began to rain. There is no account of what was done for Lord Coventry, but we can imagine that when he indicated that he was not bargain-hunting but was interested in commissioning a new set of tapestries, with furniture to match, his welcome became very warm indeed. We can say what tapestries were on the looms
that day and so may have been seen by him. Nineteen haute lisse looms were filled with partly-made tapestries, mostly huge pieces from the sets called the Chambres du Vatican (copies of Raphael’s frescoes), the Histoire de Marc Antoine (after Natoire), and the Histoire de Jason (after Jean François de Troy). On the basse lisse looms were three great armorial hangings of the type the King gave to his chancellors, and three of the fantastic but solemn scenes of the Nouvelles Indes. The Earl must have realized that none of these would suit his new room, with its delicate and extremely modish classical décor, for which, indeed, many of the hangings were much too large. Perhaps his eye was caught by two less serious subjects that were part of the Amours des Dieux set, but the pieces of this tenteure were after different painters, and, as the entrepreneurs wrote later to Marigny, nobody cared to place in one room a group of tapestries that showed such differences in styles and color schemes. On three haute lisse looms, however, and on one basse lisse were pieces, in varying stages of completion, with small scenes in medallions, illustrating the story of Don Quixote. The brilliant red background, imitating damask, might well have attracted him, and Neilson would have told him that this was a new idea. He probably added that the color would prove far more durable than the yellow “mosaic” ground previously used, which was to be seen on one haute lisse Don Quixote piece on the loom at that moment. Neilson was immensely interested in color and later became head of the dye works at the factory; in an inventory note of 1766 the crimson damask ground is said to make the tapestries on which it is used “more beautiful and more brilliant than the others.”

To return to the Earl on his tour, Neilson perhaps told him that the Duke of Richmond had
already bought a Don Quixote panel on this new red ground. But would this have been a recommendation? A man of ten thousand a year (as he once told Gilly Williams), known for his “taste and elegance” (to quote the same writer) had no need to follow in the footsteps of any duke. Perhaps Neilson then unfolded a project: the Earl could order a set of tapestries never yet made for any patron, even the King, with medallion pictures designed by the famous Boucher and with the glorious crimson damask ground, all at the low, low (comparatively) basse lisse price. It could be made cheaply and quickly, on Neilson’s looms, with furniture covers to match, and shipped duty-free in the diplomatic pouch. To clinch the deal he probably showed the Earl a colored sketch by the manufactory’s chief decorative painter, Maurice Jacques, representing “A Room as it would be, with the tapestry hangings, the bed, the armchair, and the sofa.” The quotation is from Jacques’s bill for this painting (a small object, judging from the price), which he submitted in 1762; he added to the description, “This project has been made to prepare and bring to a decision the individuals who may wish for this proposed work.” Perhaps Neilson, bowing deeply, presented the sketch to his lordship; it has not survived with Jacques’s other work of this period for the Gobelins.

The scene described above is, as has been said, imaginary, but it is impossible not to believe that something like it must have occurred. Cer-

*Drawing by Robert Adam, inscribed “Lord Coventry’s Tapestry Room” Sir John Soane’s Museum, London*
tainly the project of the Tentures de Boucher was well under way before Lord Coventry’s visit. The evidence for this is provided by the bills of Maurice Jacques, with works listed on them many of which are still at the Gobelins. In 1758 he charged for two sketches in oil for tapestries with medallions and elaborate borders (alentours); in one, the medallion pictures had been “made by M. Boucher, on an idea of M. Soufflot’s.” This work is extant, and shows a tapestry with three medallions on a red damask ground, very similar in general design to the Croome Court tapestries, though the medallions are quite different. Two full-scale paintings, some twelve feet high, one with an upright and one with a horizontal oval medallion, are described by Jacques in 1762, on the same bill as the sketch with the Apartement tel qu’il doit être; these are not the cartoons that were eventually used, but they include the flower bunches found in the bottom corners of the tapestry frames. The substantial sums of 2400 and 1800 livres were asked for these two paintings. In 1763, but perhaps after the firm order had been booked, primed canvases were delivered to Boucher for his paintings; his bills (for 5000 livres) were not presented until 1765.

The scene now shifts to England, where Lord Coventry was in residence at Croome Court in the fall of 1763; he wrote in a letter once, “September and October I always dedicate to Diana the Huntress.” Robert Adam visited him there in October (charging twelve guineas for the trip), and in November, billed him for a “Section for the Tapestry Room” (one guinea), and in January 1764 for a “Design for finishing the sides of the Tapestry Room” (three guineas). This drawing is now in the Soane Museum, London, and reveals a fascinating meeting of two worlds of design. Tapestries are shown covering three walls of the room from chair rail to ceiling cornice; the fourth wall is presumably to duplicate the one that faces it. There are a dessus de porte, or overdoor, and narrow panels between the windows and the side walls, all apparently to be carried out in tapestry. The upper parts of the wall coverings are so close to what was eventually woven that it seems likely that Adam had seen a French sketch: the flower swags are thinner and more symmetrical, and on one wall unsupported roundels have been inserted above the loops of flowers; but the general arrangement, including the placing of the medallions, is identical. In the lower sections of the tapestries Adam is on his own, and he indicates a number of ways of handling these portions, all in his own thin, clear, classical style, similar to the patterns he used on the ceiling; these linear acanthus scrolls and elongated vases would have been utterly unfamiliar (though perhaps excitingly “modern”) to any Gobelins draftsman at that date. The narrow panels on the window wall are especially revealing: on the right is a long pendant of foliage, very similar to the one that was actually woven; on the left is an attenuated classical figure on a typically unsubstantial Adam-style support. It is as if Adam had said: “Here, my lord, is what you will get at the Gobelins; here is the more suitable and correct design that I suggest.” Comparing the drawing with the tapestries as a whole, one is struck by the solidity and substance of the rococo French work, the cast shadows, the firmly planted basket and vases, the logic of the construction; for this, Adam substitutes the lightness and illogic of his two-dimensional, floating, almost bloodlessly elegant classicism.

The next entry in Adam’s account rendered is very tantalizing: “Altering the French Designs of the Tapestry room in Colours.” No drawing that can be identified with this item has survived, and it is useless to speculate what the alterations may have been, or whether Jacques’s sketch was among the “French Designs.” However, in August 1764 Lord Coventry was again in Paris, “on the old tapestry account,” as Gilly Williams wrote, and in this year the actual working cartoons for his order appear on Jacques’s bills. There is one for “a bird of prey on a grass turf enameled with flowers”; this is the gallinule, though it is hard to say why a harmless moorhen should be called un oiseau de proie. It first appeared, incidentally, on a tapestry of 1668; copying was not plagiarism at the Gobelins in the eighteenth century. Another entry is “a bagpipes, or pastoral trophy, with accessories suitable to the subject, a group of frolicking pigeons, and flowers, shaded and interspersed to unify
the composition”; this is the central section of
the lower borders on the two end wall panels.
In 1765 there are items that can be identified
with groups on either side of the chimney piece
and other parts of the large hangings, and in
1766 for the tapestries around the mirror and
other small pieces. Boucher may have given ad-
vice on these alentours cartoons; we know that
Jacques, designing the borders of some tapestries
that were to be made for Mme de Pompadour in
1758, first accepted Boucher’s ideas and then
“followed with zeal the counsels of M. Boucher
and made with pleasure the alterations he de-
sired in the course of the work.” This, of course,
was for the most important person in the king-
don and so may have been exceptional. For
Lord Coventry’s furniture, cartoons were al-
ready available; the designs had been prepared
in 1760 and 1761 for chairs and sofas to accom-
pany the Don Quixote tapestries on the red
damask ground. Covers for one armchair and a
sofa had been designed by Jacques, but Louis
Tessier did the remaining chairs, adding six
more in 1763; it is not possible to distinguish the
work of these two artists.

When a tapestry intended for the King was
placed on a loom, or taken off it, the date was
recorded, as well as the measurements, the value,
and the use to which the King put it. Work was
presumably pushed on the Coventry tapestries,
which were so new and in some respects so origi-
nal, and which would be such good advertising
material in England. Even ten years later, a
similar set for Robert Child (for complicated
financial reasons, ostensibly made for the King
and thus fully recorded) was completed in much
less time than the pieces of the same design put
on the looms at the same date that were in fact
royal projects. Lord Coventry’s tapestries proba-
ably took much the same length of time to weave
as did Child’s; the latter’s big double medallion
panel, somewhat narrower than the Croome
Court one, needed fourteen months, the smaller
hangings less than a year. By December 1766
the large Coventry pieces may have been fin-
ished, or nearly so; Gilly Williams, writing in
this month to Selwyn, who was back in Paris,
mentions Lord Coventry again and adds, “Say
something in your next about his tapestry. Write
the letter rather ostensible, and I will read it to
him.” He apparently expects that Selwyn will be able to see the tapestries and report on their progress or their beauty.

But all did not go quite smoothly. In July 1767 Neilson had to write to the new French ambassador to England, asking for a continuation of the convenient arrangement by which the tapestries were imported duty-free. “There are still some pieces of tapestry to be conveyed to London to complete those that I have sent there to M. le duc de Northumberland, to Monseigneur Coventry, to Monseigneur Fife, and to M. Weddell.” If the ambassador will cooperate he will be assisting the commerce of the kingdom and “obliging the gentlemen who have no other means of receiving the works they have ordered at great expense in a foreign country.” Neilson would be happy to show the pieces to the ambassador, as they are designed, as far as the backgrounds are concerned, in a new style never before seen in France, and from paintings expressly made by M. Boucher. The reply was unsatisfactory, and Neilson had to go higher and finally to call upon Petticoat influence before matters were satisfactorily back on their old footing. But in 1771 it was all to do again; this time the Englishmen mentioned are Coventry, “Chevalier Bridge-mann,” and the late Mr. Beckford. But we know that this was the year of the happy ending, at least for Coventry; Mayhew and Ince sent him in June the bill quoted on page 89, in the amount of £28:12. Any estimate of what had been paid for the tapestries themselves must be a guesswork. If Lord Coventry was charged for his tapestry room at the King’s price, 230 livres per square ell, the three large panels would have cost him some 15,500 livres, but the chances are that he paid a good deal more; there is a record of the Duke of Richmond having paid 240 livres per ell (Neilson got the difference) for an already completed piece. And Lord Coventry’s was a new project, with all the extremely expensive paintings and cartoons to be paid for. To estimate the total cost in modern money is an even more speculative undertaking, but a quarter of a million dollars or more is a perfectly possible answer; Neilson could hardly have failed to charge all the traffic would bear.

Lord Coventry was not only a man of taste, but, in Russell Lynes’s epithet, a taste-maker. Of the English patrons mentioned in Neilson’s appeals to the ambassadors, William Weddell and Sir Henry Bridgeman ordered the same tentures, and Weddell the furniture, making the gorgeous rooms now to be seen at Newby Hall and Weston Park. Later examples are Robert Child’s, already mentioned, at Osterley Park, and one at Welbeck Abbey; another, the Marquis of Zetland’s complete room, was offered for sale in 1934, and most of the furniture is in the Philadelphia Museum. This set included the largest tapestry made at the Gobelins up to that date, measuring nearly forty-seven feet long and fifteen feet high (it was later cut into three pieces); Neilson asked Marigny if the King would come and see it, but the director felt that this kind of publicity might endanger the smuggling operation. Neilson wrote to his English customer, however, that the tapestry, while in Paris, had been fêté comme un ouvrage unique. Louis XV and Louis XVI each ordered a number of the large panels, some of which are still in the French national collections; as late as 1806 two alentours from the tenture were on the Gobelins looms. About a dozen sets of furniture are known to have been made, as they could be used with any damask-ground tapestries; in 1779 the Cardinal de La Rochefoucauld said they were not assez riches and had a white ground substituted for the red. But, as far as we know, only the Englishmen went to the extreme of having their rooms wallpapered, as it were, with the Tentures de Boucher.

Before considering this fascinating, and still very mysterious, unique characteristic of these “tapestry rooms,” something should be said about the over-all design of the tapestries, as compared with the woven reproductions of large framed paintings of life-size figures more frequently found in this century. A tapestry consisting, as these do, of a comparatively small picture on a decorative ground had great practical advantages. For one thing, it was cheaper to make; the weavers who could do figures (called officiers des têtes) were paid two to four times as much as the men who wove the rest of the tapestry. It could also be made more quickly; a single small head could be two weeks’ work. The Croome Court medallions were woven separately and inserted into the grounds, undoubtedly to speed the work up; there is a record of a tapestry
having been made in two parts on two looms because it was needed in a great hurry. The damask background may even have been within the competence of apprentices and journeymen; a blue ground with fleur-de-lis is mentioned by Soufflôt as suitable for ouvriers médiocres. In 1768 the entrepreneurs petitioned for more Boucher medallion designs, because such tapestries were so cheap to make and had been such a success in England.

Another practical advantage of a medallion tapestry was that the cartoons of the alentours could readily be adapted to make the piece the exact size needed by the customer. Even when the tapestry had to be cut after it was finished, this was much more easily done when portions of an alentour had to be removed, rather than figures in a pictorial representation. An example in the Metropolitan Museum of a piece altered in this way is the haute lisse Don Quixote panel given by Mrs. Nanaline H. Duke and Miss Doris Duke. This was a present from Louis XV to the Russian imperial chancellor, Count Woronzoff (or Vorontzov); the bill exists for the job of making it a couple of feet narrower, but only the minutest traces of the operation are visible. Yet another convenience was that a set could be made up of any number of tapestries; the idea that the Bouchers stood for the four elements was soon dropped, and other pictures of his, representing quite different subjects, were used with the same alentours. Moreover, as the entrepreneurs said in the letter last quoted, styles had changed, rooms were smaller, and gay subjects with half-life-size figures were wanted.

There are also sound aesthetic reasons why these tapestries are so successful. There is generally a good deal going on in a good tapestry design. Large, uniform expanses, such as plain drapery, look dead when carried out in wool, and to enliven them by subtle color shadings and shadows is extremely difficult work. This was the problem faced by the Brussels weavers when the Raphael cartoons for the Acts of the Apostles were delivered to them in the early sixteenth century; in some cases, they solved it by putting Christ and the Apostles into patterned robes—even, in one instance, in the set that was sent to the Vatican. Long, straight lines, especially horizontal ones, are also technical and visual disadvantages. The most effective designs either have an allover patterned effect or consist of a few central figures on a lively, variegated ground, such as the Unicorn series at the Cluny Museum. Even when the prestige of Raphael’s cartoons was at its height, tapestries of manneristic grotesques were made that preserved this general principle and, in the Fontainebleau examples especially, often used a medallion as the central point of interest. Under Le Brun’s influence the early Gobelins tapestries were large pictures with life-size figures, like the Raphaels, but at the end of the seventeenth century, with Berain and the change to the rococo style, came a return to the older scheme. The successive alentours of the Don Quixote medallions become progressively looser and lighter from their beginning in 1717 until, in 1760, the red damask ground was invented and the last efflorescence of a truly appropriate tapestry design was under way. Over eighty separate Don Quixote pieces were made with this ground, which was also used for the Portières des Dieux and, of course, for the Tentures de Boucher. Until recently no equally effective idea was rediscovered, and the factories reproduced all through the nineteenth century paintings fundamentally unsuited to this purpose.

It is very much harder to account for the complete covering of all walls with tapestry in the Croome Court room and its counterparts in England, a fashion not found elsewhere in this century. Certainly the Gobelins factory was accustomed to making panels of unusual shapes to go over doors and between windows, as well, of course, as the small pieces used for chair and sofa backs, seats, and armrests (even these last were separately designed), and large and small screens; but the Coventry order, with its long horizontal and vertical strips, was something completely new, though doubtless welcome. Could the idea have been another of Neilson’s happy thoughts, ensuring more ells of tapestry per room? The narrow panel with the French-looking leafy pendant in Adam’s drawing suggests that Coventry might have brought back the scheme with him from Paris. On the other hand, a French visitor to England in 1775 noticed that, though most English rooms were wainscoted and painted, a custom had been introduced “among people of easy fortunes” of hanging them with flock paper imitating Utrecht velvet.
Perhaps Lord Coventry, whose fortune was more than easy, wished to hang his room with the most expensive possible substitute for paper? Or perhaps Adam, finding his patron determined to buy French tapestries, felt it would be fatal to any of his delicately carved or painted panels to be interspersed among such powerful competitors? However introduced, the fashion took, and of all the Boucher tapestry rooms only the last, the “red withdrawing room” at Welbeck Abbey, completed in 1783, has the tapestries placed in real carved frames and separated by bare panels.

The idea does not seem to have appealed to the French, though the Baron de Breteuil ordered a red-damask-ground Don Quixote set in 1785 that included four main panels and no fewer than seven smaller ones, some in unusual shapes and sizes. Nothing is known of these tapestries, or how they were used. But though rich Frenchmen may not have wanted to hang their rooms with fake red damask, there is evidence that some humbler folk did. A printed cotton in the Museum, with a red, floral damask-like ground, was made in France, probably at Melun, about 1785 to 1790. The ground, medallions, swags, and flower bunches are obviously reflections of the Boucher tapestries. This toile is a remarkable instance of the truth (pace Ruskin) that imitation of an imitation is not necessarily a crime in the decorative arts.

Two months after Lord Coventry’s first trip to Paris to buy tapestries, another English visitor went to the Gobelins manufactory. He was Tobias Smollett, the novelist, who then wrote this comment:

“The tapestry of the Gobelins is brought to an amazing degree of perfection; and I am surprised that this furniture is not more in fashion among the great, who alone are able to purchase it. It would be a most elegant ornament, which would always nobly distinguish their apartments from those of an inferior rank; and in this they would run no risk of being rivalled by the bourgeois.”

Little did he know that just such an “elegant and magnificent ornament” was being planned, on the grandest scale, by an English nobleman. The Metropolitan Museum can well be proud that one of its apartments will, indeed, always be so nobly distinguished.