THE UNICORN TAPESTRIES WERE MADE FOR ANNE OF BRITTANY

By James J. Rorimer
Curator of Mediaeval Art and of The Cloisters

A and E are the first and last letters of Anne of Brittany's first name tied together with a cordelière. Until recently it had not been possible to identify this cipher, which figures so prominently in every one of the unicorn tapestries given in 1937 to the Metropolitan Museum for The Cloisters by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. In fact, when first writing about this magnificent series, I found it necessary— notwithstanding extensive research by various scholars through the years—to state: "It is as extraordinary as it is regrettable that it has not been possible to discover for whom or where and by whom these tapestries were made."  

The first clue to the identification of the A and E developed from my reading an article in the October 1941 Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts in which Gertrude Townsend, discussing a tapestry in Boston, wrote: "A precedent for the use of cordelières in fashioning initials may be found on the pages of a prayer book made for Anne de Bretagne... in the Pierpont Morgan Library, in which the letters of her name, A. N. and E., filling the mesh of an ogival network of knotted cordelières, appear to be wrought of cordelières." Two pages of this manuscript (no. 50), which was executed about 1496 in the neighborhood of Tours, are shown in figures 1 and 2. In figure 2 the letters A and E, placed near each other, bear a striking resemblance to the cipher in the unicorn tapestries.

The cordelière, a twisted cord or rope, was worn by Saint Francis of Assisi, and Franciscan monks were called Cordeliers. Francis, Duke of Brittany, Anne's grandfather, used the cordelière as an emblem in evidence of his devotion to his patron saint. Anne used it in every possible way. It appears with her arms, with the letter A in decorations, and as part of her dress. In 1498 she founded the chivalric order of the Dames de la Cordelière, which she bestowed upon the principal ladies of her court. The convent of Notre-Dame-de-la-Cordelière at Lyons was built by her.

The letters A and E with the cordelière appear in the unicorn tapestries on the average of five times in each of the six complete tapestries and once in the fragments. The letters A and E without the cordelière appear on one of the dog collars, and the letter A alone appears on two dog collars (fig. 17). Besides standing for Anne's name, the A and E are also the first and last letters of her motto, A ma vie. Such use of abbreviations was not unusual in the Middle Ages. Among the letters used in this manner are DMS for Dominus, DS for Deus, and JS for Jesus. A drawing in the Gaignières collection shows a painted wall decoration in a chapel in Lyons cathedral, evidently intended to simulate a tapestry, with the repeating letters Chs for Charles, Cardinal de Bourbon. The letters are drawn as if they were made of cordelières with knots and tassels at each end.

Anne of Brittany (1476–1514), twice queen of France, first as the wife of Charles VIII (1470–1498) and then as the wife of Louis XII (1462–1515), was, judging from extracts from her inventories and expense accounts, one of the greatest "collectors" of tapestries in her day. Unfortunately, however, the inventories

1 Acc. nos. 37,801–6; fragments acquired in 1938, acc. nos. 38,51,1. 2
2 The Cloisters: the Building and the Collection of Mediaeval Art in Fort Tryon Park (New York, 1938), pp. 84–95.
of Anne’s tapestries have been published only to the year 1498; those after this date are in manuscript form in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Collection Blans-Manteaux) and elsewhere. When the War is over, it may be possible to discover some contemporary mention of the unicorn tapestries. Certainly tapestries of such quality and historical importance must be referred to somewhere.

A number of isolated facts besides those already mentioned, when all put together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, seem to offer conclusive evidence that the five central unicorn tapestries (2. The Unicorn at the Fountain; 3. The Unicorn Tries to Escape; 4. The Unicorn Defends Himself; 5. The Unicorn Is Captured by the Maiden [fragments]; 6. The Unicorn Is Brought to the Lord and Lady of the Castle) were made for Anne of Brittany in celebration of her marriage on January 8, 1499, to Louis XII. How long it actually took to prepare the cartoons and weave the tapestries cannot be determined on the basis of evidence at hand.

In the fifth tapestry, of which only two fragments have survived, Anne can be identified with the maiden who captures the unicorn, for though only her fingers and her sleeve remain (fig. 10), the sleeve is made of the same brocade as the dress worn by the lady of the castle in the sixth tapestry (fig. 3), who undoubtedly represented Anne (see below). It might be
FIG. 3. THE SIXTH UNICORN TAPESTRY, SHOWING THE UNICORN KILLED AND BROUGHT TO THE LORD AND LADY OF THE CASTLE, ANNE OF BRITTANY AND LOUIS XII

argued that the historical fact of Anne's widowhood would have precluded identifying her with the maiden who captured the unicorn, but this would not have been an insuperable obstacle in the late Middle Ages.

At this time, as in the Renaissance, the unicorn was associated with marriage as well as with virginity. A notable example of the introduction of the unicorn in a scene that had nothing whatsoever to do with maidenhood appears in a painting in the Cook collection. In this picture by François Clouet, Diane de Poitiers, mistress of Francis I and Henry II, is shown with two children, at least one of which was hers; in the background a fire screen has a unicorn as its central motive.

Indeed, in the present instance, the flattering connotation of the subject may have been an attempt to justify a marriage which caused a great deal of discussion. Louis, who had
FIG. 4. CHARLES VIII AND ANNE OF BRITTANY WITH A SQUIRREL AND A CORDELIÈRE, FROM A TAPESTRY IN THE WIDENER COLLECTION; FIG. 5. ANNE OF BRITTANY ABOUT 1503; FIGS. 6 AND 7. LOUIS XII. FIGURES 5–7 ARE DETAILS OF MINIATURES FROM PETRARCH'S "REMÈDES DE L'UNE ET L'AUTRE FORTUNE"
FIG. 8. DETAIL OF THE SIXTH UNICORN TAPESTRY: ANNE OF BRITTANY AND LOUIS XII

FIG. 9. LOUIS XII AND ANNE OF BRITTANY ON THE OBVERSE AND REVERSE OF A BRONZE MEDAL PRESENTED IN 1500 (DATED 1499 OLD STYLE). MODELED BY NICOLAS LECLERC AND JEAN DE SAINT-PRIEST. IN THE BARGELLO, FLORENCE
been married for twenty-two years to Jeanne, the daughter of Louis XI, though without issue, had secured an annulment from Pope Alexander VI in order to marry Anne, and the wedding took place only nine months after the death of Anne's first husband.

The maiden in the fifth tapestry is also to be associated with the Virgin and the allegory of the Incarnation. The monogram of Christ, IHS, on one of the dog collars (fig. 11) bears witness to the artist's intention of using the unicorn as a symbol for Christ. Thus these tapestries tell of the hunt of the unicorn, the courting and wedding of Louis, and at the same time of the Incarnation of Christ. There was no way in which to give greater dignity to the occasion.

That Anne was actually interested in unicorns is shown by several entries in her inventories and expense accounts. In one instance various and sundry objects, including “unicorns,” are listed. These unicorns may have been metalwork decorations, so-called unicorn horns, or representations of the unicorn in one form or another. We find two other entries dated September 18, 1498, showing that Anne had in her possession a gold ring with a unicorn on top of it and what is referred to as a “unicorn [or unicorn horn?] incased in silver-gilt at the two ends” and “more than six feet long.”

In the sixth tapestry the unicorn is slain and brought to Anne and Louis, who appear life-size, standing arm in arm, in front of the castle. Contemporary portraits of Anne are numerous and vary considerably depending on the medium used and the ability and individuality of the artist. The representations


5 Ibid., vol. IV, p. 71, no. 26, “Ung anneau d'or en la teste duquel a de la licorne, estant ou dit coffe, of Anne shown in the illustrations give some impression of this variance. When Anne married Charles at the age of fourteen, according to contemporary records she was a rosy-cheeked bride (see fig. 4); when she married Louis at the age of twenty-two she was pale-faced and wan. The portrait which seems most closely to resemble Anne as we see her in the unicorn tapestries is in one of the fine miniatures of the School of Rouen completed for Louis XII about the year 1503. The miniature is in a French translation of Petrarch, “Remèdes de l'une et l'autre fortune” (B.N. ms. fr.225, folio 165v). In making comparisons of this kind the small scale of the miniature painting and the large scale of the tapestry work must be taken into consideration.

The identification of Anne with the lady of the castle does not rest primarily on facial characteristics, as additional evidence is afforded by the literary and pictorial records of her costumes and accessories. We know that she and her ladies in waiting wore the characteristic Breton headdress of the period, which was different from that worn in other parts of France. We also know that, unlike other queens of France, who wore white for mourning, Anne wore a black cap under her Breton coif (see cover), for in the expense accounts following the death of Charles VIII there are actual entries showing the purchase of black velvet and other materials for her headdress. The undercaps worn by the ladies standing behind the king and queen are of various colors, but none are black. The gold chain around Anne’s neck—woven with gold, red, and brown threads—is like others in various portraits; in a gold medal in the Bibliothèque Nationale a pesant ung gros, vingt grains”; and p. 72, no. 34, “Une licorne enchassée d'argent doré par les deux boutz, l'enchausse faite à feuillages; & au graille bout de ladit enchasseure a ung petit bout d'argent doré, laquelle licorne a six piez de long & plus.”


7 Some of the black threads have worn away and white warp threads are in evidence.
pendent cross of the type she wears in the tapestry shows that she wore a cross on other occasions. The yellow-brown, red, and gold brocade of her dress and the particularly wide sleeves lined and bordered with fur, probably sable, appear in other pictures of Anne and are described in written accounts. In the records we read that she wore a blue girdle, and in a picture of her in her Book of Hours a portion of one is shown. Attached to the blue girdle which she wears in the unicorn tapestry is a rosary similar to that in a manuscript illumination showing her receiving from Jean

Marot the “Relation de la conquête de Gênes” (B.N. ms. fr. 5091, folio 1).

The squirrel shown prominently in the left-hand corner of the tapestry (fig. 16) is a further link with Anne. Emphasis on the animal is not accidental; it is placed against a contrasting, green hazelnut tree. Alexandre Lenoir, writing in 1819 about the famous Mazarin tapestry, which is now in the Joseph E. Widener collection, mentions the squirrel and the cordelière in that tapestry in connection with Anne and Charles VIII (fig. 4) and states that there is another portrait of the queen in which no doubt prove of interest, as the Mazarin tapestry is assigned to Jan van Room; the tapestry in the Metropolitan Museum is similarly assigned on the basis of an inscription, ROEM.

8 Description d’une tapisserie rare et curieuse faite à Bruges, représentant, sous des formes allégoriques, le Mariage du Roi de France Charles VIII, avec la Princesse Anne de Bretagne (Paris). It may be noted that the tapestry is very similar in style and in certain details to the “Fall and Redemption of Man” tapestry given to the Metropolitan Museum in 1917 by Colonel Oliver H. Payne. This relationship will

9 George Henry McCall tells me that the squirrel had escaped his attention when he wrote his splendid catalogue (1932) of the Widener tapestries and that he now agrees with this attribution.
FIGS. 12–14. ANNE OF BRITTANY’S FLAG AND LOUIS XII’S FLAG AND PENNANTS, DETAILS OF THE SIXTH TAPESTRY

FIGS. 15 and 16. ANNE OF BRITTANY’S FLAG IN THE THIRD TAPESTRY AND THE SQUIRREL IN THE SIXTH TAPESTRY
FIG. 17. DOG COLLARS WITH A, AE, AND UNIDENTIFIED COATS OF ARMS, DETAIL OF THE FIRST TAPESTRY

she is shown with a squirrel. The evidence for identifying the portrait in the Widener tapestry with Anne is incontrovertible even though it has not been taken seriously by the many writers who have had occasion to mention the tapestry during more than a century. Anne is shown in the tapestry at the age of fourteen—she was married to Charles in 1491—with her hair in two tresses hanging over her shoulders. Her blue mantle with white lambskin and her brocaded dress again correspond to contemporay records of clothes she ordered. Charles's
FIG. 22. DETAIL OF FIGURE 21; FIGS. 23 AND 24. FRANCIS I AT THE AGE OF NINETEEN OR TWENTY, FROM A DRAWING IN THE HERMITAGE, LENINGRAD, AND FROM A PAINTING IN THE MUSEÉ CONDÉ, CHANTILLY
colors, red and yellow (gold), are the predominating colors in the tapestry. The squirrel is not mentioned in any contemporary record of Anne that has come to my attention.

The prominence of the flora in the tapestries recalls Anne's particular interest in flowers. At the Château of Amboise, King Charles VIII planted gardens for the queen, and at Blois, Louis XII built other gardens for her. It has been said that the 341 varieties\(^1\) of flowers and plants that form the most considerable part of the decorations of Anne's famous Book of Hours (B.N. ms. fr. 9474) were actually grown at Blois. There are "approximately one hundred and one kinds"\(^1\)10 of plants represented in the unicorn tapestries, including some not shown in the Book of Hours.

The representation of Louis XII (fig. 8) also agrees with facts known about him. In the medal by Michel Colombe and Jean Chapillon presented to him by the city of Tours in 1500

10 J. Camus, "Les Noms des plantes du Livre d'heures d'Anne de Bretagne," *Journal de botanique*, nos. 21, 22 (October–November 1894).


12 When looked at very closely the black is blue-black; at a short distance it appears black.

...he is shown somewhat more realistically than in the rather idealized, Italianate médal (fig. 9) presented to him by the city of Lyons in the same year. His unmistakable pointed nose, the folds of his chin, and the cut of his hair are identifying features as shown in two portraits in the Petrarch manuscript noted above (figs. 6, 7). It must be remembered that these portraits were painted a few years after the marriage of the royal couple. The differences in the two representations of Louis are marked, notwithstanding the fact that both are in the same book. Louis's especially long fingers as shown in one of the miniatures and in the tapestry are notable.

The colors of Louis's costume (see cover) are particularly striking. The king wears a white hat, a short red robe or dress, and red and white striped stockings. We know that after his marriage to Anne Louis added her color, white, to his own, which had been red and yellow, and often used red and white exclusively. Elsewhere in the tapestries some of the huntsmen wear Louis's colors: red and white stockings are particularly in evidence. The five central tapestries, to judge from a small fragment of original border, were framed with two narrow bands, one white and the other red. Outside these there was a wider band of blue (shaded), the traditional color of royal France. The cordelières used to tie the initials in the five central tapestries are also red and white (silver).

Among the several flags flying from the buildings in the background of the unicorn tapestries there are four in particular which are further evidence that the two figures represent Anne and Louis. The first flag (fig. 15), which rises prominently from a gable of the castle in the third tapestry, The Unicorn Tries to Escape, is unquestionably one which Anne is known to have used. On a white (silver) field we see her black cross. In the sixth tapestry, with Anne and Louis, there are three relatively conspicuous flags. The one to the left (fig. 12), above the figure of the queen, again shows a black\(^1\)12 cross, this time on a yellow.
and gold ground. From the next roof flies Louis's flag (fig. 13) with a rather haphazardly drawn red porcupine on a field of white (silver). At the far right, at the end of the hunt, there are two pennants (fig. 14), one above the other. The upper one was at some time cut out and sewn to the lower one—it might even have come from some other place in the tapestry. Both bear Louis's colors, red and white, and the upper pennant has in addition a slight amount of yellow shading where it was probably attached to a pole before it was cut. Other flags in this tapestry are red and white (silver) and red and yellow.

There are certain other details that are significant. In the third tapestry one of the dog collars (fig. 18) has three metal (silver-gilt) fleurs-de-lis, the royal insignia, on a red band. In the fourth tapestry, The Unicorn Defends Himself, there are two important inscriptions. On a scabbard (fig. 20) we read AVÉ REGINA CŒLORUM, the salutation to the Virgin, the Queen of Heaven. In the light of our present findings the reference of REGINA to Anne also is apparent. On the collar of the dog standing at the right of the huntsman with the scabbard (fig. 19) we read OFRANCORUM RE[X], the corresponding salutation for Louis.

The suggestions that follow should perhaps be offered somewhat more hesitatingly than the evidence already given, though they do seem to fit into our puzzle and to explain why the first and last tapestries in the unicorn series are different from the others. The young boy with Anne and Louis (fig. 3) might be Francis I at the age of four or five. It is possible that the unicorn tapestries came into Francis's possession when he married Claude, Anne's daughter and heir, in 1514, shortly after the queen's death. It is also possible that Francis
presented the tapestries to his godfather, Ferdinand de la Rochefoucauld. This would account for the letters F and R now placed in the sky of the third tapestry and would give us the missing link between Anne and the Rochefoucauld family in whose possession the tapestries are known to have been as early as 1728. These letters (fig. 25) are noticeably different from the A’s and E’s woven into the body of the tapestries.

When I was telling this story to Paul J. Sachs of Harvard University he suggested that the young man (fig. 22) shown in the first tapestry (fig. 21) looked like Francis I. This young man wears the royal colors of France, red, white, and blue (his hose are white to a point just above the knee and striped blue and white above), and the two men accompanying him wear Francis’s colors—red, tan (yellow), and blue. Two contemporary portraits of Francis, the one beardless and the other with the beard just started, are illustrated in figures 23 and 24.

It had been thought that the coats of arms on the dog collar (fig. 17) in the first tapestry would one day be the key to the mystery of the provenance of the unicorn tapestries, but so far they are still unidentified. They are not the arms of Anne, Louis, or Francis, or of any member of the Rochefoucauld family as far as has been ascertained to date. The three blank shields may have been used to suggest the royal fleurs-de-lis, and the three roses (or cinquefoils) may be the same as those placed on a document concerning Guillaume de la Rochefoucauld dated January 14, 1506. The fact that more arms and insignia do not appear on the five central tapestries which originally hung together as a group (the first and last tapestries hung in a different room) in the ancestral castle of the Rochefoucauld family at Vertueil is explained by an edict of 1793, sent to the Société populaire of Vertueil from the Société populaire of Ruffec, which ordered that all tapestries having royal insignia be destroyed. If we compare the upper sky and verdure sections of the unicorn tapestries with somewhat earlier fragments in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (fig. 26) we have an explanation for the stupid cutting at the top of our tapestries and also for the lack of easy identification. The spirit of the Ruffec revolutionaries was probably carried out by removing the royal insignia. The puzzling quest is nearly at an end.