The genius of the Brussels weavers of the Renaissance lay in their ability to imbue their creations with an unrivaled sense of the luxurious. Theirs was literally a golden age. Galleons from the Spanish Main were constantly plying from the New World to the Old, and their cargos of the precious ore, quickly passing through the Spanish treasury, were diffused like an Olympian rain over the body of Europe. Gold from the Americas gave the late Renaissance one of its dominant tones: it touched all the arts. And never was it more effectively used than in tapestry, the most prized decorative art of the Hapsburg monarchs of Spain and the Netherlands.

Two hangings of the Flemish Renaissance, recently purchased by the Museum, are a case in point, for although they are eminently satisfactory in design, coloring, and workmanship, it is the omnipresent metal that most completely captures the onlooker’s attention. Brilliant gold thread is used throughout—in the field, in the borders, and even for the tiny weaver’s mark in the selvage. It would almost be strange if it were otherwise, for though the tapestries were not made for a Hapsburg, their original owner, a ruler of Saxony, lived with Hapsburg magnificence. These tapestries were only two among the more than two hundred pieces counted in 1565 for an inventory of the Saxony collection in Dresden.

As indicated by their subjects, the Last Supper and the Ascension, the two new hangings were once part of a series depicting the Passion of Our Lord. Two separate Passion series, of ten panels each, as early as 1565 were recorded as hanging in the Chapel of the Ducal Palace in Dresden. One series, which dates from the second or third decade of the century, was called the “Old Passion,” and the other, from the middle of the century, was known as the “New Passion.” The evidence of style shows that the Museum’s two panels belong to the later series, which was made either for the famous Elector Maurice, who died in 1553, or for his successor, Elector Augustus. The subsequent owners, their successors in the Albert Wettin line, ruled Saxony until the end of the first World War, and from 1806 bore the title of king.

The two Passion series apparently hung in the Palace in Dresden until 1701, when the building was destroyed by fire. We do not know how many of the individual hangings escaped the flames. What is clear is that those surviving were forgotten until 1790, when six panels—including examples from both series—were discovered stored away in the Brühl Palace in Dresden. There they remained until the eighteen-fifties, when all six were placed on exhibition in the Dresden Picture Gallery, which was then being organized.

Those readers of the Bulletin who long years ago may have visited that gallery to see the Sistine Madonna, may recall our two tapestries hanging in the near-by rotunda. Together with the other four, they were removed from exhibition in 1911, although they were in the gallery’s keeping until 1924. Then as part of the settlement relating to the separation of the royal house from the free state of Saxony, our two panels reverted to the family of Albert Wettin. In 1928, less than two decades before Dresden was to lie in ruins, they left Germany. They were brought to America by Prince Ernst Heinrich of Saxony (third son of the former king, Friedrich August III) and sold to a New York art dealer, from whom in recent months the Museum has acquired them.

The Last Supper and the Ascension belong to that considerable group of weaves con-
The Last Supper, a mid-xvi century Flemish tapestry probably designed by Michel Coxcie. This tapestry and the Ascension, shown on page 174, are from the Royal Saxony collection.

connected by design with the school of Bernard van Orley, the "Flemish Raphael," who himself produced numerous tapestry designs. One art historian, Emil Kumsch, in 1913 went so far as to write that our two Saxony tapestries were actually after Van Orley's own designs. Since on stylistic grounds they seem more likely to have been planned after his death in 1542, we turn in search of their author to one of his disciples, Michel Coxcie, who succeeded him as the leading designer for Brussels weavers. He was engaged in this work from 1543 to 1567. Although no list of the many series planned by Coxcie has ever been made, one set, the Story of Abraham, in Madrid, as the Spanish art historians Tormo Monzó and Sanchez Cantón have pointed out, seems surely to have been composed by him. The Museum's new tapestries show the same type of design, and we therefore believe that
The Ascension, a mid-xvi century Flemish tapestry probably designed by Michel Coxcie. Note particularly the resemblance between the central figure in the foreground and that of Abraham shown in the detail illustrated on the opposite page.

As far as we know, the Ascension design is unique in tapestry; the Last Supper, on the other hand, is closely related to two celebrated hangings which are variants of a single design. One is the Last Supper in the Philip Lehman collection in New York; the other, which Tormo Monzó and Sanchez Cantón have also attributed to Coxcie, is in the former Royal Palace in Madrid. Until the overthrow of the monarchy in 1930, the latter piece was displayed only once a year, on Holy Thursday, when it served as the background for a most unusual ceremony. In commemoration of Christ's Last Supper with his Apostles, the Spanish king, in the presence of all his court, would wash the feet of twelve beggars and then serve them food.
To return to our Saxony tapestries, both bear in the selvage the mark BB (for Brussels and for Brabant, the duchy of which Brussels was the capital). The tiles in the flooring of the Last Supper panel, which have for their ornament the heraldic lion of Brabant and the double-headed eagle of the Hapsburgs, who then ruled in the Netherlands, are further indication of their place of origin. The same weaver’s mark, occurring in both tapestries, has not yet been identified, but it may possibly have belonged to a member of the celebrated weaving family of Geubels. In view of the superb quality of his work, this mysterious weaver ranks high among the masters in that golden age of tapestry.

The Last Supper, acc. no. 44.63.4; h. 10 ft. 3 in., w. 9 ft. 7 in. The Ascension, acc. no. 44.63.5; h. 10 ft., w. 9 ft. 7 in. Both panels are woven in wool and silk threads. The gold thread is on a silver base; plain silver thread is also used. The tapestries are in an extraordinary state of preservation; they are free from repair and show remarkably little fading. At present they are exhibited in Gallery C 21.