THE MUSEUM’S COLLECTION OF MEDIAEVAL TAPESTRIES

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Many travelers to Europe will recall among their most thrilling experiences seeing the Apocalypse tapestries at Angers and the Lady with the Unicorn series at the Cluny Museum in Paris. Now that these tapestries are here in New York and can be seen in clearer view, they offer many surprises for those who knew them only in the once dingy corners of their pre-war locations. They are among the most celebrated works of French art, the most spectacular of the seventy-five Gothic hangings so generously made available to the American public through the French Government in the present magnificent loan exhibition of French tapestries. Never before has there been such an opportunity for us to see in a single city so many resplendent productions of the artists and weavers of the Middle Ages. Not even in mediaeval times, at a coronation or a royal marriage, was such a representative array of tapestries to be seen. Though contemporary ledgers and other record books attest the fabulous holdings of the wealthiest of kings and nobles, even such great collections as those of the Spanish royal family or the Burgundian dukes never included so varied a selection.

It is hard to realize that such treasures could ever have been depreciated. Yet changes in taste have dealt harshly with most of them. As the heirlooms of previous generations went out of fashion, Gothic tapestries suffered neglect, and by the eighteenth century many were held in such poor esteem and were in such poor condition that they were relegated to the attic or discarded like so many pieces of burlap. In 1767 the chapter of the cathedral of Angers decided that the Apocalypse tapestries, then the object of strong criticism, “would no longer be hung.” In 1782 it was decided to place them on sale, but there were no takers. During the French Revolution they served as winter protection for the orange trees in the greenhouse of the abbey of Saint Serge. Later some of them were used to line the stalls of the bishop’s stable. When church property was sequestered, they were sold at auction by the government for three hundred francs.

An edict ordering the destruction of all tapestries having royal insignia, sent to the Société Populaire of Ruffec in 1793, may well have been responsible for the loss of many valuable works of art. The Unicorn tapestries at The Cloisters escaped only because of their usefulness as warm coverings. With their insignia amputated they were used to keep potatoes from freezing. Many tapestries were sacrificed for the value of the gold and silver in them. In 1797 the French Directory burned a hundred and nineteen and recovered thirteen thousand dollars’ worth of precious metals.

A New York tapestry authority who has handled some two or three thousand tapestries, tells a story of some fragments that were on the floor of a French house where a doctor had been called to see a sick child. When the doctor was asked to wipe his feet on these “old rags” and asked their provenance, he was told that the child’s father had taken them when they were thrown out at the old château where he worked. The doctor bought them for two dollars and forty cents, and, in the course of time, they came to this Museum as our first Gothic tapestries and may now be considered among our greatest treasures. In recent years we have learned that these pieces were originally part of the Seven Sacraments tapestry made for Pasquier Grenier, the celebrated weaver and merchant, and presented by him and his wife to the church of Saint Quentin at Tournai about 1475.

The first indication of a revived interest in and appreciation of Gothic tapestries came in
1838, when Achille Jubinal, member of the French Royal Society of Antiquarains and Professor of Foreign Literature on the Faculty of Letters of the University of Montpellier, wrote *Les Anciennes Tapisseries historiées, ou Collection des monumens les plus remarquables de ce genre qui nous soient restés du moyen âge.* While this publication is far from approaching in magnitude the scholarly compendium in six volumes produced by Heinrich Göbel in our own day, it was the first serious study in the field. Jules Guiffrey in his basic history of tapestries, printed at Tours in 1886, refers to it as a "revelation."

But even as late as 1852 the French king Louis Philippe sold a set of ten tapestries, the Hunts of Maximilian, for only $1,240 and another group of six Flemish tapestries of the sixteenth century for a mere $27 apiece. Between 1859 and 1867 three fine Gothic tapestries, including two of the Esther panels, were acquired by the South Kensington Museum in London (now the Victoria and Albert) at an average cost of $100 each. In 1872, the South Kensington had to pay $950 for their Susanna and the Elders, and in 1883 $5,000 for the Triumph of Fame. In 1901, at the de Somzée sale in Brussels, eighty-eight tapestries brought $160,000; in 1902 one tapestry sold for $330,000. In the "gay twenties," a number sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars, and one set was purchased for over a million.

The Metropolitan Museum held its first exhibition of tapestries in 1880, ten years after its founding, with twenty loans from private collectors, and it acquired its first Gothic tapestries forty years ago, the Seven Sacraments fragments already mentioned, presented by the elder J. Pierpont Morgan. Bashford Dean, then Curator of Arms and Armor, rightly referred to this acquisition in the Bulletin as "the most important gift of recent months—of years, some connoisseurs will declare." Since that time our collection has grown by purchase, gift, and bequest to become one of the best in the world. In the Main Building and The Cloisters there are some sixty-five Gothic tapestries and about a hundred from the Renaissance and later periods. Nowadays the great Fifth Avenue mansions no longer exist in their former grandeur, nor so many of the large Long Island country houses, in which tapestries lent a continental air to the luxurious high-ceilinged interiors of yesterday. But public interest in tapestries has continued to grow and, thanks to the enthusiasm of collectors, as well as scholars and other tapestry-lovers, many have been brought to America and later acquired by the Museum.

The present magnificent loan exhibition not only focuses attention on these permanent collections of ours but permits the making of comparisons never possible heretofore. Most of our tapestries have been discussed from time to time in Museum publications. But three additions, two of them relatively recent, claim especial attention because of their intimate relation to the Angers Apocalypse and the Lady with the Unicorn.

A detail of our King Arthur tapestry is shown on the next page in comparison with one of the Apocalypse figures. This tapestry was part of a series representing the Nine Worthies, nine heroes or noble men of history and legend popular in the Middle Ages. They were: three Jews, Joshua, David, and Judas Maccabeus; three pagans, Hector, Alexander, and Caesar; and three Christians, Charlemagne, Arthur, and Godfrey of Bouillon. Several series, now lost, of these figures are recorded in fourteenth-century inventories and other contemporary documents, and when we acquired the Arthur panel in 1932 we believed that it was the only existing large fragment (about 8 by 10 feet) of such a set. Nothing was known of its early history beyond the fact that it had been in the Chabrière-Arlès collection and was exhibited in Lyons in 1877. Scholars had to content themselves with recognizing it as a production of the Paris looms of Nicholas Bataille, from which the Apocalypse tapestries also came.

Recently the Museum has been extremely fortunate in obtaining for The Cloisters additional pieces from the same series of the Nine Worthies, an acquisition made possible through the munificence of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who also gave us the Hunt of the Unicorn series. Among the hundred or more fragments,
King Arthur. From a series representing the Nine Worthies. Made in Paris, last quarter of the xiv century. In the Metropolitan Museum

there are complete panels of Joshua, David, Alexander, and Caesar. Until they came into the possession of the owner from whom the Museum—after ten years of negotiations—acquired them, they had been pieced together, more or less haphazardly, to serve as window curtains in a château. It will take months, perhaps a year or two, before the King Arthur and its companion pieces can be washed and reassembled.

While the Apocalypse tapestries are on view at the Museum, their many similarities to the panels of the Nine Worthies will receive special study. And the King Arthur panel will be kept in the Hall of Mediaeval Tapestries (galleries A 16-17) until the close of the loan exhibition so that it may be compared with the tapestries from Angers.

The King Arthur, like the large Angers figures, is seated under a vaulted architectural structure. He is placed in a single bay, as if in a niche; the Apocalypse figures, sometimes identified as the Seven Bishops of Asia, are seated under tabernacles with openings on all sides. The drawing and weaving of the hair and beards with shading and slits is comparable, as are the flowing Gothic draperies of the garments. The Angers figures are somewhat more elongated, perhaps owing to the requirements of the composition and subject matter. Butterflies, coats of arms, foliage, patterned textiles like those of the Angers tapestries appear in those recently acquired. Both series are woven approximately twelve and a half ribs (warp threads) to the inch; the shading of colors with the use of light and dark tones and the double weft threads, are technical peculiarities pointing to the Bataille workshops.

In both sets of tapestries the stonework is a yellowish tan color, now somewhat faded, silhouetted against a very dark, almost black sky. The bright yellow crockets of the architecture
The Hunt of the Unicorn. Made about 1499 for Anne of Brittany. At The Cloisters
The Lady with the Unicorn. Probably made for Claude le Viste, about 1509-1513. Cluny Museum, Paris. Both series of tapestries are approximately 12 feet high.
Details from the Hunt of the Unicorn (left) and the Lady with the Unicorn (right)
Details from the Hunt of the Unicorn (left) and the Lady with the Unicorn (right)
of our tapestries are outlined in red. Shaded reds and blues are the predominating colors in both sets, and big expanses of these colors alternate in the design. In general, green is used sparingly and is deftly introduced in limited passages. There are in all fewer than thirty tones.

With only two sets of tapestries, and a few isolated pieces here and there, surviving from the fourteenth century, it will require documentary evidence to prove the certain origin of the Nine Worthies series. The spirited action of the Angers Apocalypse tapestries, made for Louis of Anjou, must in large part be accredited to Hannequin of Bruges, known as Jean Bandol, who prepared the cartoons. The arms on the Worthies tapestries are those of Louis's brother, Jean Duke of Berry, but no conclusive information about their designer has yet been discovered.

Ever since the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries were bought by the Cluny Museum from the municipality of Boussac in 1882, they have captivated all beholders. The gentle lady, who is thought to personify the five senses, sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste, and in the last tapestry, with the inscription A MON SEUL DESIR, to represent the summation of all that man requires of the fair sex, is of a frail and tender unworldliness worthy of a suitor's devotion. If, as is generally believed, she is intended to be Claude le Viste, fiancée of Jean de Chabannes-Vandenesse, then the tapestries can be dated between 1509 and 1513. The heraldic lion and unicorn at either side of the lady in each of the tapestries symbolize strength and purity. The pictorial simplicity of these utterly charming tapestries is greatly enhanced by the shaded red background, originally a stronger red, delicately scattered with flowers and familiar animals to the delight of all lovers of nature.

We have discovered that the lady of the Cloisters Unicorn tapestries is Anne of Brittany. Five of the set were made to commemorate her marriage with Louis XII in 1499. The first and last of the series were probably added for Francis I about 1514, the approximate date of the Cluny tapestries, with which there are many similarities in drawing, particularly in the flowers. The drawing is less accomplished and less realistic than that in the tapestries made for Anne, with their rounder and more graceful figures. They are less closely woven, having approximately fifteen to sixteen ribs to the inch; the five early Hunt tapestries have approximately nineteen ribs to the inch. Coloring is a matter of taste, but the garments in the Anne tapestries, some of them enriched with metal threads, and the myriad details are certainly more variously colored. The lyric qualities of the Unicorn in Captivity are matched, perhaps surpassed in the Cluny Unicorn. But rabbit for rabbit, dog for dog, the Anne of Brittany tapestries are definitely more alive, more brilliantly conceived and executed. The participants in the hunt are portrayed with a breath-taking vividness that is superior to anything found in other contemporary tapestries.

It is the strength and vitality of such mediæval masterpieces that has caused modern French artists to revive the tapestry workshop at Aubusson. Inspired by the Middle Ages without being enslaved by their traditions, they have given us a unique opportunity in the current loan exhibition to see the new with the old and to rejoice in their imaginative, daring creations. Once more, as so many times in the past, the world owes a debt of gratitude to the artistic genius of the French.