When young Rainer Maria Rilke was in Paris working on his monograph on Rodin he began, under the influence of that great, revered master, to study and to love some of the art masterpieces of the past. Among the works that he came to know at that time are the tapestries of the Lady with the Unicorn—one of the famous series so generously represented in the special loan exhibition of tapestries, brought together by the French Government, now on view at the Museum. Rilke’s impression of these celebrated hangings is vividly recorded in the following passage:

“There are tapestries here, Abelone, wall tapestries. I imagine that you are here; six tapestries there are: come, let us pass slowly before them. But first step back, and see them all at once. How peaceful they are, are they not? There is little variety in them. There is always that oval, blue island, floating on a background of modest red, which is decked with flowers and inhabited by tiny animals busy with their own affairs. Only yonder, in the last hanging, the island rises a little, as if it had grown lighter. It has always one figure on it, a lady, in various costumes, but she is always the same. Sometimes there is a smaller figure beside her, a maid-servant; and heraldic animals are always there, large, also on the island, taking part in the action. On the left there is a lion, and, conspicuous on the right, a unicorn. They carry the same pennants which show high above them: three silver moons ascendant, in blue chevrons on a red field. Have you looked? Will you begin with the first?

“She is feeding a falcon. How sumptuous her raiment is! The bird is on her gloved hand and it stirs. She is watching it and at the same time plunging her hand into the bowl the handmaid brings, to offer it something. Below, on the right, a silken-haired dog is lying on the train of her dress, looking up and hoping it will be remembered. And, did you notice? a low rose-trellis shuts off the island at the back. The blazoned animals stand erect, with heraldic arrogance. The coat-of-arms is repeated as a mantle enveloping them. A handsome clasp holds it together. It floats.

“Do we not involuntarily approach the next tapestry more softly, when we see how profoundly the lady is absorbed? She is weaving a garland, a small, round crown of flowers. Thoughtfully she chooses the colour of the next carnation in the flat basin the servant holds for her, while she fastens the one just selected in its place in the wreath. Behind her on a seat there stands unused a basket full of roses, which a monkey has uncovered. But this time they must be carnations. The lion no longer takes part; but the unicorn on the right understands.

“Should not music enter into this stillness, is it not already there, subdued? Gravely and quietly adorned, she has gone forward (how slowly, has she not?) to the portable organ, and now stands playing it. The pipes separate her from the maid-servant who is blowing the bellows on the other side of the instrument. She has never yet been so lovely. Wonderfully her hair is brought forward in two plaits, fastened together over the head-dress in such a way that the ends rise out of the knot like a short crest. The lion, out of humour, unwillingly endures the sounds, biting back a howl. But the unicorn is beautiful, as with an undulating motion.

“The island has become broader. A tent has been set up. Of blue damask and flaming gold. The animals hold it open, and she is stepping forward, homely almost in her queenly attire. For what are her pearls compared with herself? The maid has opened a small casket, and now

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lifts from it a chain, a ponderous, magnificent ornament that has always been kept under lock and key. The little dog sits beside her on a high place prepared for it, and looks on. Have you discovered the motto on the upper edge of the tent? It is: *A mon seul désir.*

“What has happened? Why is the little rabbit running down there, and why does one see at once that it is running? Everything is in such suspense. The lion has nothing to do. She herself holds the banner. Or is she leaning on it? With her other hand she has grasped the horn of the unicorn. Is this mourning? Can mourning stand so straight? And can a mourning-garment be so mute as that green-black velvet with its lustreless folds?

“But here is yet another festival; no one is invited to it. Expectation plays no part in it. Everything is here. Everything for ever. The lion looks round almost threateningly: no one may come. We have never seen her weary before; is she weary? Or is she merely resting because she holds something heavy? A monstrosity, one might say. But she curves her other arm towards the unicorn, and the flattered animal bridles and rears and leans against her lap. It is a mirror that she holds. See! She is showing the unicorn its likeness—.”

We know from Rilke’s letters that the mysterious poems of his last and greatest cycle are often revenants of impressions of many years before. Mysteriously they returned to him with a deeper, symbolic meaning. Among the poems in the great cycle of his last period of creativeness there is this sonnet:

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O this is the creature that does not exist. They did not know that and in any case—its motion, and its bearing, and its neck, even to the light of its still gaze—they loved it.

Indeed it never was. Yet because they loved it, a pure creature happened. They always allowed room. And in that room, clear and left open, it easily raised its head and scarcely needed to be. They fed it with no grain, but ever with the possibility that it might be. And this gave the creature such strength, it grew a horn out of its brow. One horn. To a virgin it came hither white—and was in the silver-mirror and in her.

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This sonnet and the earlier prose show how the poet’s imagery became deeper as it became further separated from reality. The art of tapestry is somewhat similar, since it becomes greater as it chooses its own means of conveying the real impressions from which its inspirations come.