The development of tapestry weaving from the beginning of the Renaissance to the French Revolution may be likened to a spreading tree. There is a great trunk with numerous branches, one of which eventually rises to a towering height. The trunk is Brussels; the branches are the many European manufactories set up with the help of Flemish weavers; the one towering branch is the Royal Manufactory of the Gobelins.

During the fifteenth century most of Europe's tapestries were woven in the region that now comprises Belgium and the adjoining section of France directly to the south. In this region were found such centers for the weaving of tapestry as Arras and Tournai. This area, always one of the richest on the continent, was for long periods ruled by the tapestry-loving dukes of Burgundy. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the Burgundian dominions came under the Hapsburg rule. The Hapsburgs made Brussels their chief city, and it was they who during the next century secured the primacy of that city in tapestry weaving.

The interest shown in tapestries by Charles V was typical of the whole family. He had been the last of the illustrious line of Burgundian dukes. As king of Spain and emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, he wielded unrivaled power on the continent. His great personal wealth was augmented by the stream of gold which during his reign began to pour in from the Indies. Nothing less than this was needed to pay for the Brussels tapestries that he and those about him ordered.

As long as funds were available, master weavers like Pieter van Aelst, Willem van Pannemaker, and Franz Geubels produced innumerable series of hangings heavy with gold and silver thread, the like of which the world had never seen. When, after nearly a century of dominance, the Hapsburgs found their grasp on Europe weakened and their treasury depleted, Brussels tapestries lost their unique splendor, although less fine examples were still turned out in profusion.

Whenever rulers in other countries decided to set up factories of their own, they naturally turned to the Netherlands for their weavers. The Arazzeria Medicea, as the weaving manufactory in Florence was called, was founded in 1546 by Cosimo I, Duke of Florence. Cosimo's first step had been to engage two Flemish master weavers, John Rost and Nicholas Karcher, to work for him. In 1601, when Henry IV of France planned a new factory, he also called upon two Flemings, Marc Comans and Franz van der Plancken. When James I of England established the Mortlake looms in 1619, the Fleming Philippe de Maecht became master weaver, and the helpers were all Flemish. Clearly these manufactories were branches of the parental trunk—Brussels.

The classic example of this dependence upon the traditions and skills of the Netherlandish weavers is found in France at the time of Louis XIV. In 1662, barely two years after he had assumed active rule, the French monarch established the Gobelins manufactory, the crowning branch in our tapestry family tree. Although furniture and other objects of decorative art were also made there, it was tapestries that gave the manufactory its lasting fame. The royal letters patent read in part: "We have purchased the Hotel of the Gobelins with several adjacent houses and have sought out artists of the highest reputation . . . ; ministers of refined taste have been brought from Italy and the most capable artisans from the Low Countries."

Louis had planned well. Masters of weaving like the Flemish Jean Jans were equal to every demand made upon them by the king, who
eagerly followed their progress and with a lavish hand subsidized their industry. Not content with just the Gobelins establishment, the French ruler also founded a subsidiary factory at Beauvais, in which he ordered tapestries to be woven “in the Flemish manner.” For more than a hundred years Europe’s finest tapestries were produced by the Gobelins and Beauvais weavers.

In brief outline, that is the story of tapestries since the early Renaissance. As it has unrolled, it appears that, if the art was derived from Flemish sources, its nourishment came from other quarters. It was the most regal of arts, receiving its chief support from kings and princes. Renaissance rulers never forgot that some of the most resplendent figures of the Middle Ages, upon whom they continued to
model themselves, had taken the keenest delight in tapestries—the chivalric Burgundians, Philip the Good and Charles the Bold, who had both loved them, and, in the early Renaissance, the prodigious Charles V, the embodiment of kingship. And so in their turn did they.

Despite the fact that tapestries increasingly became part of the paraphernalia of royalty, they gradually lost the useful role that had been theirs in the Middle Ages. Then their function had been architectural; to all appearances they were the walls, decorative and warmth-retaining, of halls and chambers. During the Renaissance they were no longer fully identified with the walls on which they were hung, a change due partly to the adoption of canons of the classical style for interior architecture. In accordance with the new taste, all decorative ele-
ments not permanently incorporated into a room tended to be given a secondary role. And among these were tapestries.

Another factor also militated against tapestries, and that was the change in styles of painting. The mediaeval pictorial style was two-dimensional; the renaissance style, based on the new-found laws of perspective, was three-dimensional. Time has shown that the renaissance mode did not serve so well as the mediaeval in large-scale tapestry decoration. Yet with all these limitations, magnificent examples were still produced simply because tapestries were a royal concern. It is not without significance that the art came to a sudden end, an end that coincided with the fall of the ancien régime.

The renaissance and post-renaissance tapestries in the Museum's collection illustrate the development outlined above. Together with the magnificent mediaeval hangings also owned by the Museum, they present a rich and fully-delineated picture of the whole story of tapestry weaving in western Europe, and form one of the most representative of all tapestry collections.

The mere listing of some of the more important post-mediaeval pieces with what we know of their history, is in itself highly illuminating. Among the Brussels tapestries, there is an extraordinary representation of the Crucifixion woven after a design by the Flemish painter Bernart van Orley. Formerly in the renowned collection of the Spanish dukes of Berwick and Alba, the tapestry came to the Metropolitan as a bequest from its late president, George Blumenthal. Then there are two spectacular hangings from a series of the Story of Mercury, woven by van Pannemaker with a heavy impasto of silver-gilt threads. These were successively in the Spanish collections of the dukes of Medinaceli and the Duchess of Denia; more recently they belonged to Mr. Blumenthal, who bequeathed them to the Museum. There is also a unique pair of small grotesque panels in the style of that sixteenth-century percursor of surrealism, Cornelis II Floris. The tradition is that they were made for the bed of Margaret of Parma, daughter of Charles V and regent of the Netherlands. They too are Blumenthal gifts. Two superb Brussels hangings are from a series of the Months of the Year, after designs attributed to van Orley. To what family these originally belonged is not known, but they were in the Séchan and Dreyfus de Gonzales collections and were left to the Museum by Mrs. Augustus D. Juilliard. Finally there are two panels from the New Passion series which were in Dresden in the possession of the kings of Saxony until after the first World War. They were purchased by the Museum a few years ago.

Although few important tapestries were woven in France during the sixteenth century in comparison with the large number produced in the Middle Ages, the Museum counts among its finest treasures two examples from this period. Their subjects are episodes from the Story of Diana, their designs by the painter Jean Cousin; they were woven in Paris as decorations for the fabulous Chateau d'Anet of Diane de Poitiers. The Museum received them as presents from the children of Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney in memory of their mother.

When we come to the French productions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, again, as might be expected, we are concerned with a collection of great richness. The outstanding tapestries of this period are ten from a Months of Lucas set woven at the Gobelins factory under the direction of Michel Audran for the Count of Toulouse, son of Louis XIV. They were later in the possession of King Louis Philippe of France and were recently given to the Museum by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. These, and the Museum's two Gobelins hangings from a set of the Hunts of Maximilian, are typical of many series made during the reigns of Louis XIV and his successors in that they were actually copies of famous Flemish tapestries of the Renaissance. They show to what degree the basic formulas of design set by the earlier Brussels masters were still being used more than a century later by the weavers of France. The impress of the Hapsburgs had not yet vanished.

It has been indicated that the end of the ancien régime spelled finis to the ancient art of tapestry. The Museum's portrait in Gobelins tapestry of Napoleon, given by this leader of France to his minister Cambacérès, seems to
Hers's Bridal Chamber, from the Story of Mercury. Brussels, about 1550. Bequest of George Blumenthal, 1941
prove this thesis. It is truly a remarkable example of weaving. The panel measures less than sixty by ninety inches, yet over a period of three years no less than eight weavers worked on it under the direction of Cozette, master weaver. Never before in the long history of tapestry had such extraordinary efforts gone into the weaving of a single piece. It is sheer virtuoso work. But who will not say that Gerard's painting, of which the tapestry is an exact copy, is not the more effective portrait?

In the past decade the art has been successfully revived. French designers and weavers, finding their inspiration in mediaeval simplicities, have made tapestry an effective medium for modern decoration. A selection of these recent productions, which constitute such a large and important section of the current loan exhibition of tapestries from the museums and private collections of France, will be illustrated and discussed in the January issue of the Bulletin.
The Drowning of Britomartis. Woven in Paris in the mid-XVI century. Gift of the Children of Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney in Memory of Their Mother, 1942