THE TWELVE AGES OF MAN

By EDITH A. STANDEN

Associate Curator in Charge of the Textile Study Room

To all English-speaking people, Shakespeare’s words on any subject are final. We think of Pyramus and Thisbe as comic, rather than romantic, characters, because they were played by the “rude mechanicals” in the Midsummer Night’s Dream, and the Ages of Man are, beyond all question, seven, as enumerated by the melancholy Jacques. But, though Shakespeare has fixed this number, seven, so firmly in our minds, there are several other ways of dividing the span of life; the ages of man can be three, as in Dosso Dossi’s picture in the Metropolitan Museum; four, corresponding to the seasons; nine, or even twelve, one for each month of the year, as in the set of tapestries considered here. These four great hangings were made in Brussels about 1520 and are a recent gift from The Hearst Foundation, in memory of William Randolph Hearst.

The only representations hitherto known of this subject, the Twelve Ages of Man, are the calendar illustrations in a series of Books of Hours published in Paris in the early sixteenth century. The treatment is very simple; as in Shakespeare’s lines, a typical life is pictured, from baby days to death, one scene to a month. Descriptive verses in French (lacking in the copy in the Metropolitan Museum Print Room) show that a man’s life span is taken to be seventy-two years; each month, then, represents a period of six years. February, reproduced here, thus corresponds to the years from six to twelve, when boys are in school.

Perhaps one of these Books of Hours came into the hands of a scholar who had been ordered by a wealthy patron to draw up a scheme for four new tapestries. As it stood, the idea was far too simple and direct, but it provided the skeleton for a towering structure of erudition and far-fetched analogies. Each tapestry is dominated by the figure of a pagan deity, enthroned in the center; a Latin inscription identifies the god or goddess and names the season over which he or she reigns, fair Venus in peaceful spring, beloved Ceres in fruitful summer, wine-bearing Bacchus in wine-rich autumn, and the wind god, Aeolus, in gloomy winter. But we are not dealing with a set of the Four Seasons (a favorite tapestry subject), as above each deity appear the symbols of three months starting with January, February, and March (instead of March, April, and May) for spring, and ending with October, November, and December (instead of December, January, and February) for winter. We are concerned with the seasons of the life of man, and, as in the Books of Hours, each month corresponds to a period of six years.

The three roundels, ringed with hourglasses, immediately under the upper border of each tapestry, contain signs of the Zodiac and symbols of the months—the familiar “occupations” found in so many medieval manuscripts. The first and third month on each tapestry have, below the roundel, another representation of an “occupation,” such as pruning vines for March or sheep-
The second tapestry, summer, with Ceres, the goddess of fruitfulness, sitting on a throne. The design of the tapestries is the same: the roundels show occupations of the months (here, April, May, and June) and the signs of the Zodiac, and the principal scenes symbolize the corresponding periods of life.
The third tapestry, representing the autumn of man’s life, with Bacchus ruling as the deity of wine. July, August, and September are the harvest months.
Winter, the last eighteen years of man's life, ending with his death at seventy-two. Aeolus, the wind god, reigns over October, November, and December.
Details of the tapestries on pages 242 and 243: Venus, with Cupid on her shoulder reaching for his bow, and Ceres, wearing a flowered dress.
shearing for June. The scene beneath the center month, however, refers, not to the time of year, but to the corresponding period in the life of man, and this is also the subject of each of the two large scenes on either side of the central deity. A Latin inscription in the upper border endeavors to link the characteristics of the month with those of the corresponding period of life; another below identifies the story chosen as an illustration.

The mind of a most learned and subtle humanist is evident in the choice of these stories. He has taken them from classical and Old Testament myth and history, and, though some are well known, others are obscure indeed. In January, the Latin distich says, the ground is frozen hard; the intelligence of the very young child is similarly benumbed. To illustrate this infantile stupidity, the tapestry shows a legend of Moses. When still a child he stole Pharaoh’s crown (it can be seen lying on the ground); for this he was condemned to death, but his father suggested that he was too young to know what he was doing. To test his intelligence, therefore, he was offered the choice between a bowl of pieces of gold and one containing burning coals; Moses, in true baby style, picked up a coal and put it in his mouth, thereby both saving his life and causing him to be forever after “slow of speech and of a slow tongue,” as described in the Bible. In February a thaw begins and education similarly starts to loosen up the childish mind. The scene shows a boy kneeling before some imposing figures, with a group of agitated women behind him. He is Papirius, who had heard a debate of the Roman Senate when he was still too young to attend; his mother teased him to tell her what had been discussed, and he said that the question had been whether a man should be allowed two wives or a women two husbands. The mother, greatly excited, told her friends, and the women rushed to the Capitol to plead for polyandry rather than polygamy. The amazed Senators, who, of course, had discussed nothing of the sort, finally discovered the source of the rumor. Papirius was highly praised for so cleverly concealing the real subject of the debate, which was much too important to be revealed to women. March is the month for pruning, and education performs a similar task for the boy of twelve to eighteen. The story here is historical, illustrating Petrarch’s account of the young Alexander’s wise words to some Persian envoys who arrived during his father’s absence.

The second tapestry, the summer of man’s life, shows him in his years between eighteen and thirty-six. Flowers and virtue appear in April; the story is that of Hercules, in a dream, making the right choice between virtue and vice, here shown as Minerva and Venus. May is the time of blossoms that will become fruit, and loving-making that will produce children; Adonis embraces Venus. In June the crops ripen and a man does valiant deeds. The inscription identifies the central figure as Curius Dentatus, refusing the
Samnites’ bribes (shown as crowns en broche), but it is clear that the designer had not read Livy’s account, which describes him as being, on this occasion, “seated at his hearth cooking turnips.”

From thirty-six to fifty-four is an autumnal period. July dries up the grass and the strength of the body likewise declines. We see the centaur Chiron instructing the young Aesculapius in medicine. In August the harvest is gathered, and so should man garner his wealth; the illustration is of Joseph ordering the harvest to be cut and stored in anticipation of the lean years. September brings the vintage, and Hercules performs the last of his labors, killing the dragon that defended the garden of the Hesperides and plucking the golden apples.

From fifty-four to seventy-two we are in the winter of our lives. In October the fields are prepared for future crops and man must take similar care of his children. The illustration shows the Byzantine emperor, Tiberius II, uncovering the treasure of Narses; the inscription states that he gave it to the poor, which seems to show rather a lack of consideration of his children. November, however, repeats the instruction; seeds must be sown in the ground and children must be taught. We see Tobit, blind and lame, giving counsel to his son Tobias before he starts on his journey. In December the wheat is threshed, the grains being forced from the ears; so, in man’s final period, death drives life from the limbs. The deathbed shown is that of Jacob, as he blesses the sons of Joseph; he crosses his arms to place his right hand upon the younger son, Ephraim, and his left hand upon Manasseh, as described in Genesis.

It can easily be imagined with what fascination the loungers in the great hall of some princely house puzzled out inscriptions and stories of such elaboration and obscure erudition. The modern spectator, who gets his intellectual sustenance from the printed page, will be comparatively indifferent to the meanings of the Latin and the actions, but he cannot fail to be impressed by the clear, strong colors, the noble lines of the draperies, and the innumerable charming details, such as the bunches of hearts-ease and daisies that powder the dress of Ceres. Realistic touches catch the eye, such as the pair of skates that hang on a column flanking the figure of Aeolus; they must belong to the icicle-crowned man behind, who blows on his fingers and is surely a personification of Frost. His companion, with a great shock of white hair and a bewildered look, can be called Snow.

On the hem of a man’s robe in the Alexander scene are the letters σάμ, preceded by one which looks like λ but may possibly be r. It is probable that this is the name of the designer, Jan van Room, a distinguished, but, at present, somewhat enigmatic, artist of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century in Flanders. Another tapestry with his signature has recently been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum and will be published in the June Bulletin.

The style of the Hearst tapestries shows that they were woven in Brussels about 1520. A later version of the Curius Dentatus episode exists; the Brussels double-B in the border indicates that it was made after 1528, when this trademark became obligatory. But the day of these great, complicated, moralizing sermons, or novels, in tapestry was passing. Raphael’s famous cartoons of the life of Christ had already arrived in Brussels and had been copied on the looms; it is easy to imagine the vast excitement in the shops as the weavers worked their threads into these calm, simple, classical forms, utterly different from anything they had ever seen before. The Hearst tapestries, in fact, date from a turning point in the history of tapestry; the New Learning appears in the choice of stories (it will be observed that there are no Christian subjects at all), but the medieval idea of a tapestry as a thing to be studied and “read” persists in the way they are combined and organized. The personages are less densely packed than in medieval tapestries and their clothes are less ornamented; little winged boys have flown up from the south to hold the grapevines and flower garlands in the borders. Gothic foliage appears occasionally, but the bulk of the decorative detail is determinedly in the new manner. The Renaissance, in fact, has arrived.