In 1663 Louis XIV gave an order which has proved of inestimable value to art historians. He named a new Intendant and Controller General of the “meubles de la Couronne” and directed him to draw up an inventory of the royal possessions. The letter of appointment was long and detailed: “Louis, by the grace of God, King of France and Navarre, to all who shall see these letters, Greetings. As there is nothing that more surely shows the magnificence of great Princes than their superb Palaces and the precious furnishings with which these are adorned, most of the Kings our predecessors have taken great pains to build the former and to construct and preserve the latter; the beautiful specimens of architecture which are seen in our Royal Houses and what remains to us of rich tapestries and beautiful furnishings are the result of their good intentions and serve today as a monument to their glory.” The king went on to say that, having given peace to his people, he would imitate his ancestors, re-establish his palaces, especially the Louvre, and have very rich furnishings of all kinds made for them. (Here was one royal promise that was kept, up to the hilt.) But, the king continued, the past century had seen a dissipation prodigieuse of accumulated treasures, and preservation was no less important than creation. So a beloved and faithful servant was given the job of both supplying and taking care of the royal property, receiving in return all the “honors, authority, powers, functions, prerogatives, pre-eminences, privileges, entries, wages, appointments and pensions, rights, fruits, profits, revenues, and emoluments” that went with the position. He was to inspect all the furnishings of all the king’s palaces and to make a new inventory, very exact and certified by himself personally.

It was ten years before the inventory was completed, and throughout the long reign it was continually being changed and enlarged. Almost all of it has most fortunately been preserved, and here we can read of the gold and silver (practically all melted down for ready cash when Louis XIV’s wars brought the kingdom to the verge of bankruptcy), the rock crystals, mirrors, brocades, porcelains, pictures, furniture, bronzes, marbles, 2,740 tapestries, and 274 carpets in all the king’s palaces. All were to be most prodigiously dispersed at the end of the next century, when the auction sale at the “ci-devant Château de Versailles” alone lasted almost a year and contained 17,182 lots.

There are many kinds of carpets in the inventory. Some are “de Turquie,” some “du Caire”; many are Persian, and it would be pleasant to see the one that had a gold center with four tigers devouring four stags, or, another, even though all wool, that was “sémé d’animaux,” or the one with a white ground and little Chinese figures. But these are the earlier entries, and, as the years roll on, the most usual description becomes “ouvrage de la Savonnerie.” In 1681 no less than ninety-three of this type are listed as a single set, “ordered for the floor of the great gallery in the Louvre.” Later, five of the set having been given away by the king, replacements were made for them, and, prudently, four more were made to serve as future presents. All these carpets are the same length, seven and a half aunes (twenty-nine feet three inches), but the widths range from two and a quarter to five and three quarters. The colors and designs vary, but there is a strong family resemblance; the compiler of the inventory repeats again and again the words “scrolls,” “cornucopias,” “flowers,” “arms of France,” and “monogram of the king.” Each has usually one distinctive feature, however, such as Cupid, Hope, Felicity, the Elements, Neptune and Galatea, Peace and Abundance, or Justice and Astrology. (A possible explanation of this last rather curious juxtaposition is that astrology here means “natural astrology” or, as we should say, astronomy, so that the inexorable law of the heavens is equated
ON THESE PAGES: A royal Savonnerie carpet, one of a set of ninety-three ordered by Louis XIV for the Great Gallery of the Louvre palace. Made at the end of the XVII century. Length 29\(\frac{1}{2}\) feet. Rogers Fund, 1952

with the king’s justice on earth.)

It is one of this set that has recently been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum and placed on exhibition with other French works of art of the ancien régime. It is twenty-nine feet six inches long and sixteen feet wide. In the four corners great acanthus scrolls, blue, red, yellow, and green, writhe with disciplined fury on a brown ground so dark that it is almost black, like frenzied snakes under the iron control of a superhuman charmer; at one tip each scroll bursts into a naturalistic flower spray. A series of uncompromisingly classic medallions of different shapes lie one upon the other to fill up the center of the carpet; each is framed with rigid architectural motives, but in the interstices grow lush
The carpet is decorated with royal French symbols, flowers, fruits, acanthus scrolls, dolphins, rams’ heads, and figures at each end representing Music. The principal colors are blue, yellow, gray-white, pink, and dark brown.

bunches of flowers and clusters of fruit. Some of the flowers are conventionalized, but there are clearly recognizable sunflowers, carnations, tulips, roses, hollyhocks, and lilacs, and, most conspicuously, a great fringed poppy, full blown, its heavy petals, white tipped with pink, twisted around the seed pod; the fruits include grapes, apples, peaches, and gourds. In the gadrooning round the central circle are complete plants, pushing their way up through holes in the framework. The general effect is of unquenchable vitality, the horsepower of a jet fighter plane, held in place by immovable barriers; it is the baroque in classical chains.

Amid this controlled exuberance of the decorative elements are the specific details that have
enabled the carpet to be identified, the spheres with fleurs-de-lis, the royal crowns, the crossed L’s for Louis, and the large green panels, like bas-reliefs, at each end showing figures with musical instruments. In one a robust nymph supports a lyre while a plump child plays on a shawm; in the other a lute, viola da gamba, and trumpet lie beside a seated woman with a page of music in one hand and a scroll in the other. Above her, a little bird on a twig is singing his heart out. It is clear that these panels represent Music.

The color effect of the carpet as a whole is pale and gentle—clear blue, yellow, gray-white, with a scattering of pink over all, and the one strong note of the dark ground in the four corners. It is probable that the colors were originally somewhat sharper and brighter, but the wool at the base of each knot is not strikingly different from that at the surface. The design is organized for the benefit of a person standing in the center of the carpet; in its general lines it resembles the typical layout of an elaborate ceiling of the period.

The royal inventory lists four Savonnerie carpets with simulated bas-reliefs representing Music. The eleventh of the set of ninety-three was eighteen inches wider than the Metropolitan’s example, and a note in the inventory says that it was given to the Siamese ambassadors in 1685. (Incidentally, the Savonnerie workshop is proud of the fact that, in 1910, it received a request from Siam for the repair of the nine carpets sent to that country in 1685.) The twenty-first is described in exactly the same words as the eleventh, but it was even wider. However, the replacement for the eleventh, recorded in an inventory entry of 1697, was only sixteen feet three inches wide. It is described at unusual length: “A large Savonnerie carpet, brown ground (for the Great Gallery of the Louvre, a repetition made to replace another carpet like those in the said Great Gallery which was given to the ambassadors of the King of Siam in January 1685, inventoried here above under the number 152, eleventh of the aforesaid carpets), with an altered center in which there are two compartments, one with a white ground on which are represented cornucopias and two green rams’ heads, the other with a blue ground filled with two crowned spheres with the arms of France in a purple shell between two dolphins, and on the sides the king’s cyphers on two plastrons; in the center is an oval with a white ground with yellow gadroons filled with flowers; at the two ends of the said carpet are two green bas-reliefs representing Music; 7½ avenes long, 4½ avenes wide.” Every detail in this description corresponds with the carpet in the Museum, which seems now to be three inches longer and three inches narrower than it was in the seventeenth century—differences that may well be the result of humanly comprehensible inaccuracy in the original measurements.

However, the eleventh carpet in the original set of ninety-three was copied yet once again and stored for use as a possible present. In 1715, the inventory records, this copy was given to the Persian ambassador. Now, today, in the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery at San Marino, California, lies a carpet of approximately the appropriate width, one half of which repeats, almost exactly, the design of half the Metropolitan Museum’s carpet. A strip of about four feet wide across the center is gone, all marks of royal French ownership have been obliterated, and the medallions at the ends are totally unlike each other. Can this be the remains of the carpet that the French king intended for the monarch of Persia? (Coals to Newcastle, indeed, as anyone who has seen Persian carpets of this period will testify.) But it is possible to doubt whether this present ever reached its intended recipient. Saint-Simon in his memoirs described the reception of the Persian ambassador with his usual acerbity, and said that everyone except the king, who was so soon to die, knew that the whole affair was a farce; the so-called ambassador was “most embarrassed and very badly dressed, his gifts less than nothing.” He was a minor official, in France on commercial business, and had been persuaded by the king’s principal minister to pose as an ambassador so that Louis XIV might think the great days of his reign were come again. When the poor man escaped from the ceremonies, during which he had made such unfortunate mistakes, did he perhaps dispose of the presents with which he had been loaded be-
The central medallion of the carpet. Above the spheres with fleurs-de-lis are crowns; the crossed L's represent Louis XIV's initial. The central oval is enclosed by gadrooning with flowers growing through the framework.
fore returning to face his own royal master and the difficult task of explaining how he obtained them?

It will probably never be known which of the two carpets, now so strangely reunited on a single continent though three thousand miles apart, was the present to Persia and which once lay on the floor of the Great Gallery at the

Panel at one end of the carpet. The figure and the musical instruments, a viol, lute, and trumpet, are blue green on a light green ground, imitating a bas-relief.

Water’s Edge, to give it its full title, in the Louvre, along with ninety-two companions. The visitor to this gallery today, who manages to turn his eyes from the masterpieces on the walls to look at the stupendous room along which he is making his way, does not see anything like the Grande Galerie of the seventeenth century. What a modern guidebook calls the “monotony of perspective” provided by its 482 yards of length (over a quarter of a mile) is now broken up by huge detached columns and other devices, the windows have been replaced by a glass roof and the ceiling level lowered. But to a seventeenth-century eye there would have been no monotony in such a magnificent perspective; the gallery, internally almost uniform, with its endless rows of windows overlooking the Place du Carrousel on the north and the Seine on the south, was one of the glories of Paris.

The gallery, joining the palace of the Louvre to that of the Tuileries, was originally conceived by Catherine de Médicis, thinking, it has been suggested, of the structure that connects the Uffizi and the Pitti in her birthplace. The city wall of Paris then cut across the space between the two palaces, and the gallery would afford an escape route for a monarch who wished to leave his capital without encountering his subjects in the streets. The building housing the gallery was not finished, however, until 1608, nearly twenty years after Catherine’s death. Below the gallery were a number of apartments which, until the Revolution, Henry IV and his successors allotted to the court painters, sculptors, goldsmiths, clockmakers, and other craftsmen; the gallery itself was very useful to the young Louis XIII when he was dauphin. Here he played with his brothers and half-brothers, riding in a dogcart, flying sparrows, once, it is recorded, setting the king’s hounds on a fox, and once, an even more spectacular event, watching a camel gallop. But during the troubles of the Fronde the gallery fell into disrepair and was even used for storing grain; so, in 1668, the king ordered its redecoration. Four years earlier, as we learn from the Comtes des bâtiments du roi, the Savonnerie manufactory had started to make carpets for the Louvre, from designs by Baudrin Ywart and Francart (probably François Francart), both assistants of Le Brun; the task took twenty years.

It has been mentioned that the royal inventory, by a curious coincidence, lists exactly ten times as many tapestries as carpets. It is hard not to suppose that an inventory of a modern, inhabited royal palace would not, probably, reverse these proportions. The presence of wool on the floor seems as normal to us as its absence from the wall. This was not the case in the seventeenth century. Knotted carpets from the Orient, where they had been made from time immemorial, were still exceedingly expensive, and, though the technique is believed to have been practiced in medieval France, no examples have survived. Until the sixteenth century only kings put carpets on the floor rather than on tables, and even in the eighteenth century only those of extremely high birth were privileged to
use one in a private box at the opera. In 1766 tapis are still defined as pieces of material for covering tables and benches—or to be spread on floors to make them warmer. Yet a satisfactory, durable floor covering cannot be made by ordinary weaving; so it is understandable that when a certain Pierre Dupont claimed that he had discovered the method of making Turkey carpets he should have received every encouragement from the French royal family. In 1606 Dupont was given a workshop in the Louvre; in 1626 his partner (with whom he soon had a long, involved, and extremely wordy quarrel) set up a manufactory in a disused soap works at Chaillot, on the site of the present Musée d’Art Moderne. Here he undertook to give a hundred ten- or twelve-year-old children from a neighboring orphanage a six-year apprenticeship, and here, for two hundred years, carpets were made for the rulers of France. As early as 1654 Louis Dupont, son of Pierre, claimed that, abroad, people now talked of carpets being made “façon de France,” instead of “façon de Turquie.” A hundred years later a Frenchman who had started a manufactory at Fulham said that he was making carpets “after the manner of . . . Chaillot”; these, he wrote, “are far superior for Beauty to those of Persia, where Drawing and Painting are not so well understood, and where perhaps the Art of dyeing such a Variety of Colours is not so well known.”

In the Descriptions des arts et métiers, the section “Art de faire les tapis, façon de Turquie, connus sous le nom de tapis de la Savonnerie,” published in 1766, from which our illustration is taken, the method of manufacture is described. The print shows two workers, properly bewigged, working at two rather narrow rugs; for a twenty-six-foot carpet, the text explains, four or five workers would co-operate. The man on the right is making the knots round the warp threads with the wool wound on a bobbin in his right hand; he does this so fast, we are told, that the eye of the spectator cannot follow him. The man on his left is cutting a series of knots to make the pile of the carpet. The cartoons they are copying are fixed above their heads; the royal arms are clearly visible. The woman on the left is winding skeins into balls, the man in the background transferring the woolen thread onto the bobbins.

In 1825 the shop was moved to the Gobelins, where it is still in existence, though its work today is mostly repairing old carpets or making new borders for them. A good apprentice can tie knots after three months’ practice and do adequate work in two years, but at least five are needed before he can be considered a master of the craft. A plain carpet can be made at the rate of three square meters a man a year; a patterned one, of course, grows more slowly, depending on its complexity.

This, then, was the way in which the king’s carpets, “façon de Turquie,” were made; the knot used was the Ghiordes, and, in the Museum’s example, there are ninety of them to the square inch. One must suppose that the carpets were taken to the Grande Galerie as they were completed; the combined length of all ninety-three shows that they could have been placed in two rows, lengthways, along the gallery fairly comfortably. So many of them are, apparently, pairs (though not so designated in the inventory) that it seems reasonable to suppose that this was indeed the arrangement, with the odd one perhaps in the terminal pavilion, or marking the one place where the gallery was slightly wider.

The panel at the other end. The classical appearance of the figures is very typical of the works of art produced for Louis XIV by Le Brun and his assistants.
A print showing the method of carpet-making at the Savonnerie manufactory in the xvIII century. From Duhamel du Monceau’s “Art de faire les tapis,” 1766. One of the men at the looms is making the knots; the other is cutting them to form the pile; the woman is winding the wool into balls; and the third man is putting it on bobbins.

The only trouble with this stupendous picture, a double line of enormous carpets stretched out inexorably for a distance considerably more than the length of the Metropolitan Museum, is that the widths differ so greatly. It is unlikely that large pieces of furniture were placed along the walls, as the room was considered merely as a passage way and as a place for exercise (Henry IV said he was building it to have somewhere to walk while he watched the life on the river) and for crowded ceremonies (Louis XIII and Louis XIV both touched people here for the king’s evil). The alternative method of placing the carpets, crossways, would have given practically wall-to-wall coverage, as the gallery is about eleven yards wide. Fortunately, the combined widths of the ninety-three carpets are some ten yards greater than the length of the gallery, so, unless several carpets were used elsewhere, this possibility does not have to be contemplated.

When about half the carpets had been made and, presumably, put in place, Louis XIV abandoned the Louvre forever. The whole court moved to Versailles in 1678, and the Louvre was left largely to the artists in residence, and, after 1680, to various academies of the arts and sciences. The Great Gallery was used sometimes by civic dignitaries and foreign ambassadors when they were invited to watch festivities taking
place on the Seine. There is no more word of the carpets, including the replacements, which were all finished by 1697. In 1699 about half the gallery was used for an art exhibition; contemporary prints of this event show bare floor boards. It is possible, in fact, that some of the carpets, at least, had already been removed, because in 1697 the gallery began to be used as a show place for a series of models of the fortified cities of the kingdom. These were most elaborate things, so detailed that individual houses could be identified. By 1754 there were about 120 of them, and they filled the whole gallery, supported on wooden tables; they were not moved until 1777, when the suggestion was first made that the Louvre should become a museum. It stands to reason that they must have been very heavy. Now, none of the few of the ninety-three carpets so far identified shows the slightest sign that table legs have ground into its woolen pile year after year. The history of the carpets, in fact, after their appearance in the inventory, is a complete blank. Many carpets from the royal collections were sold in 1796, chiefly to dealers; purchasers had to promise to remove any marks of feudalism—"de faire disparaître les fleurs-de-lis." It is hardly likely that every such promise was kept; so the "feudal" tokens still so fortunately in place on our carpet are no proof that it was not sold at the time of the Revolution, perhaps after remaining in storage during most of the eighteenth century. It is known that a section of the Grande Galerie was used for storing tapestries after 1680.

As our discussion of the Huntington Gallery's carpet has shown, identification of still extant examples of the displaced carpets has not been simple. Undoubtedly, many were cut up to fit more normal rooms, and carpets of the same type were made for other locations in royal palaces. However, there are at least four carpets in the Mobilier National, Paris, one in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and another in the Huntington Gallery, beside the one already mentioned, that correspond exactly to inventory entries for the Grande Galerie. The Metropolitan Museum's carpet takes its place with this pitifully small remnant. It was found, some twenty-five years ago, in the country house of Count Mesmer-Saldern in Schleswig-Holstein. A family tradition linked it with the name of Catherine the Great, and, indeed, a Count Saldern had been her representative in Holstein. But the founder of the family with the double name, Captain Mesmer, was an officer of Napoleon's army who married a Danish heiress in 1811; it seems possible that the carpet may have been part of his contribution to the household goods.

The carpet was taken from Schleswig-Holstein to Paris and later to New York. It has not been used in recent years, and, if it replaced number eleven on the floor of the Grande Galerie, it is possible that it did not lie there for as long as a decade. It shows comparatively little evidence of wear, and, whether it went to Persia or not, it could never have been dinted by the red heels of the Roi Soleil. It remains, however, a superb embodiment of the art of his reign, proud, grandiloquent, technically perfect, and, above all, disciplined.