A Fourteenth-Century German Tapestry of the Crucifixion

REBECCA MARTIN
Instructor, Department of Education and Art History, Cleveland Museum of Art

In 1916 The Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired a small tapestry representing the Crucifixion—the crucified Christ between the Virgin Mary and St. John the Evangelist—with the additional figures of St. Catherine of Alexandria on the left and St. Margaret of Antioch on the right (Figure 1). Currently displayed in the Museum's Medieval Treasury, the panel is of a rather coarse texture, with a linen warp of eleven or twelve threads to the inch and a wool weft. There are losses at the top and bottom, and both sides have been cut (a discussion of condition is given in the appendix).

Although much faded, the tapestry is still impressive for its vivid color contrasts and bold patterning. By silhouetting slender figures against an azure sky emblazoned with bright yellow stars, the artist achieved an abstract, two-dimensional effect well suited to the textile art. Their heads reverently inclined, the Virgin and saints turn toward Christ, whose thin body seems to hover weightlessly before the sky, against which the narrow blue-green arms of the cross are barely visible. The wounds in Christ's hands and feet bleed profusely and his body is flecked with blood from the Flagellation. The Crown of Thorns, although not represented, has left its mark on Christ's forehead (Figure 2).

In 1917 R. A. Meyer-Riefstahl associated the Metropolitan Museum tapestry with one in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg; composed of two panels seamed together, this shows SS. Clare of Assisi, John the Baptist, and Agnes in the left panel, and Dorothy, Peter, and Paul in the right (Figure 3).1 Meyer-Riefstahl suggested that the Crucifixion in New York originally constituted the central portion between these two panels.2 Another suggestion, made by Betty Kurth in 1926, was that the New York and Nuremberg panels might be the remains of two tapestries from a set rather than sections of one long hanging.3 Recent intensive study of the panels has made it possible to establish definitely that they once formed part of the same tapestry. As a result more can now be said about its probable place of origin and function.

In the Nuremberg tapestry, the blossoming branch

1. The saints represented in the New York and Nuremberg tapestries carry their usual attributes (see Joseph Braun, Tracht und Attribute der Heiligen in der deutschen Kunst [Stuttgart, 1943] cols. 45–48, 195–198, 365–369, 413–418, 423–425, 489–495, 589–591, 594–601). Only one requires comment. St. Margaret holds in her left hand a cross, symbolic of the sign of the cross with which she vanquished Satan when he appeared to her as a dragon. It is possible that the tongues of flame visible at her lower left are the breath of fire from the defeated dragon, as has been suggested by W. M. Milliken [W.M.M.], "A Late Thirteenth-Century French Tapestry," MMAB 11 (1916) p. 147. However, although artists of the 14th and 15th century often depicted the dragon either beneath Margaret's feet or reposing docilically in her arms, I have been unable to find an image of the saint from this period that shows a fire-breathing dragon. Perhaps the designer of the tapestry chose a seldom-depicted instrument of the saint's torture, a torch.


3. Betty Kurth, Die deutschen Bildteppiche des Mittelalters (Vienna, 1926) I, pp. 58–61. Kurth considered that uniting the fragments in New York and Nuremberg would result in too monotonous a design (ibid., p. 80 n. 4). She suggested that the Nuremberg panels flanked a central figure, perhaps a Madonna.
1. The Crucifixion, with St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Margaret of Antioch, German (Upper Rhenish, probably region of Constance), mid-14th century. Tapestry (wool, linen, and silk), approx. 2 ft. 8 in. × 5 ft. 8 in. (81.3 × 172.7 cm.). Ex. colls. Hoentschel and Morgan. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Francis L. Leland Fund, 16.90

2. The Crucified Christ, detail of Figure 1

held by St. Dorothy has alternating white and red flowers on its right side but no corresponding flowers on the left. At the far right edge of the New York panel, at the level of St. Margaret's halo, are three small flowers—two white and one red—which, although often not visible in earlier photographs, are still largely intact; there are also touches of color which are probably the remains of other flowers. Unconnected with any of the New York figures, these are St. Dorothy's missing flowers. To restore them to their proper place and the tapestry to something resembling its original appearance, the Nuremberg panels must be divided between SS. Agnes and Dorothy and the three pieces reassembled as shown in Figure 4.

This reconstruction makes it possible to estimate the original length of the tapestry as between 11 and 12 feet, and to reject Meyer-Riefstahl's suggestion that the tapestry may have included other figures now lost. The design as a whole is rhythmically harmonious and complete. Beginning with the Virgin and St. John and moving outward, each saint is slightly taller than the previous one. At either end of the tapestry SS. Clare

4. Exact measurements are not possible because of the uneven cropping and/or deterioration of the tapestry along all borders. The New York panel measures roughly 2 ft. 8 in. × 5 ft. 8 in. The two combined fragments in Nuremberg, which were more severely cropped at the bottom than the New York piece, measure roughly 2 ft. 5 in. × 5 ft. 5 in.
3. Six Standing Saints (Clare, John the Baptist, Agnes, Dorothy, Peter, and Paul), German (Upper Rhenish, probably region of Constance), mid-14th century. Tapestry (wool, linen, and silk), composed of two panels joined at dotted line, approx. 2 ft. 5 in. × 5 ft. 5 in. (73.7 × 165.1 cm.). Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, inv. no. Gew 670 (photo: Germanisches Nationalmuseum)

4. The Crucifixion, with Eight Standing Saints. Partial reconstruction of the tapestry now divided between New York and Nuremberg (see Figures 1 and 3) and John the Baptist and SS. Peter and Paul are compositionally set off from the other figures. The slenderest of the saints, they stand erect, not inclined toward the cross but facing one another as in a dialogue, so that the composition is effectively closed off at either end.

At some unknown date and for an unknown reason the New York–Nuremberg tapestry was cropped at the bottom and divided into three parts. The photographic montage, of course, gives no indication of the design along the lower border. To make an informed guess as to what this was, we must look to other fourteenth-century German depictions of the Crucifixion flanked by saints. The majority show the cross rising from a small mound, with unshod figures
to either side of it standing on a narrow strip of earth.\textsuperscript{5} One example is the embroidered mid-fourteenth-century altar frontal from the Franciscan convent at Königsfelden (Figure 5). Here the attendant saints are set within Gothic arches against a plain background; in other respects, however, the foot of the antependium suggests what the missing portion of our tapestry may have looked like. In the tapestry, a rather small, subjugated dragon may have been shown beside or under St. Margaret’s feet.\textsuperscript{6}

It was Kurth who in 1926 first advanced the idea that the New York–Nuremberg tapestry might have been made in the mid-fourteenth century in the Upper Rhenish city of Constance, rather than in France as had thitherto been believed.\textsuperscript{7} Direct evidence for weaving activity in Constance during the fourteenth century is in fact scarce. Some indication that the craft was known there may be provided by a wall painting of about 1315 in a house in Constance (Figure 6). The painting—one of a series of twenty-one depicting women engaged in the production of linen and silk fabrics—shows a woman seated at an upright loom

5. The Crucifixion, with Six Standing Saints, antependium, German (Upper Rhenish), 2nd third of 14th century. Embroidery on velvet. Bern, Bernisches Historisches Museum, inv. no. 19 (photo: Bernisches Historisches Museum)


5. See, e.g., Paul Clemens, Die gotischen Monumentalmalereien der Rheinlande (Düsseldorf, 1930) I, figs. 29, 195, 234. In the simpler three-figure German Crucifixions of the 14th century the cross is frequently erected upon a small mound of earth. St. John is usually barefoot, while the Virgin Mary's longer robe covers her feet. For examples see Alfred Stange, Deutsche Malerei der Gotik (Berlin, 1934) I, figs. 19, 21, 32, 43, 69, 138, 162, 164.

6. See note 1 above. For German Crucifixion paintings of 1325 and 1411 showing Margaret with the dragon see Clemens, Monumentalmalereien, I, figs. 195, 277.

with an inscription which Kurth interpreted to mean “Thus can I weave tapestry.”8 Kurth pointed also to the relatively large number of references to tapestries in Constance church inventories of the sixteenth century as indirect evidence that tapestry weaving was probably known in this region at an earlier period. Her main argument for the presence of tapestry weavers in fourteenth-century Constance, however, rested on the compositional and stylistic parallels between the Crucifixion tapestry and mid-fourteenth-century art works from the region of Constance, particularly a wall painting—dated by an inscription to 1348—in the upper sacristy of Constance Cathedral.9 It is a simple representation of the crucified Christ with the Virgin and St. John standing beneath the arms of the cross (Figure 7). A miniature of the Crucifixion from an Upper Rhenish manuscript of the

7. The Crucifixion, German (Upper Rhenish), 1348. Wall painting. Constance Cathedral (photo: Alfons Rettich, Staatliches Hochbauamt, Constance)


9. Kurth, Bildteppiche, I, pp. 80–81. This painting, to which the central group of our tapestry is so similar in composition and iconographic detail, was the subject of a scholarly debate ranging over some five decades. At issue was whether the type of Crucifixion depicted was unique to the Upper Rhineland, as Gramm believed, or not, as Vitzthum argued. In a compromise, Wienecke and others maintained that the particular combination of features represented by the painting was characteristic of, though not unique to, the Lake of Constance region in the 14th century—a view with which I agree. For the entire debate see: Georg Graf Vitzthum, Die Pariser Miniaturmalerei von der Zeit des hl. Ludwig bis zu Philipp Valois und ihr Verhältnis zur Malerei in Nordwesteuropa (Leipzig, 1907) pp. 237–238; Wienecke, Konstanzer Malereien, p. 35; Clemens, Monumentalmalerien, I p. 55; Stange, Deutsche Malerei, I, p. 61; Von Claparède-Crola, Profane Wandmalerei, pp. 72–74.

mid-fourteenth century also shows a remarkable resemblance to the New York tapestry, not only in the figure of Christ, but also in the poses and gestures of the Virgin and St. John (Figure 8). As in the tapestry, the slender figures stand almost erect with only a suggestion of the S-pose, their heads inclined. Mary, whose arms are tightly bound, slinglike, by her mantle, clasps her hands before her breast, while St. John holds a book firmly against his chest with his right hand and raises his left as if in dismay. The type of Crucifixion image represented by the wall painting, the manuscript illumination, and the tapestry is characteristic for the Lake of Constance region in the fourteenth century, recurring more frequently there in wall paintings, manuscript illuminations, and stained glass than elsewhere in Europe.  

10. A combination of all or most of the following features characterizes this type of crucified Christ: the slumped-over body; the head hanging over the right shoulder; the hair, which hugs Christ’s head and then flows in wavy lines over his neck and shoulders; the arms describing a broad arc; the open hands jutting above the arms of the cross; the emphasized breastcage and ribs; the wounds gushing blood; the twisted legs and crossed feet; the draping of the loincloth, which hangs in heavy, pointed folds from the left hip and right knee, baring the left knee and covering the right.


12. Bataille is frequently mentioned in documents from 1373 to 1399 as “tapissier et varlet de chambre” of the duke of Anjou, as “tapissier de Paris,” and as a “marchant de tappiz sarrazinois.” On Bataille and his workshop see Salé and Souchal, Masterpieces, nos. 1 and 2 (ill.). Dora Heinz, Europäische Kunst um 1400, exh. cat., (Vienna, 1962), pp. 457–459, suggests that
The Brussels tapestry, usually dated to the 1380s, resembles in certain respects the New York-Nuremberg Crucifixion. This raises the issue of possible influence on German tapestry weaving from a better-established French industry in the fourteenth century. The somewhat ethereal participants in the Presentation, akin to the saints of the Crucifixion, move stiffly in a row and wear rather spare garments, the folds of which tend to fall in vertical and angular rather than curving lines. Their long hair, like that of the figures in the Crucifixion, is represented by parallel wavy lines. Common to both tapestries is the use of a repetitive allover background pattern against a dark blue or bluish ground.

Given these similarities, the early attribution of the New York-Nuremberg tapestry to a French atelier is understandable.13 However, many factors confirm its German, and specifically its Upper Rhenish, origins. The Crucifixion is a narrow panel, which in its original state probably measured only about 4 by 12 feet. This horizontal, rectangular format is characteristic of German and Swiss tapestries of the fifteenth century. The earliest known French Gothic tapestries, on the other hand, were woven on much larger looms and are both grander in scale and more elaborate in composition. For example, the Angers Apocalypse set comprised seven tapestries about 6 feet in height with a total length of some 156 yards.14 That the Brussels Presentation is part of a larger tapestry is evident from the bits of architecture and an angel's wing visible at the lower edge of the panel.

The simple composition of the Crucifixion, with figures standing side by side silhouetted against a patterned background, is typical of Upper Rhenish tapestries of the fifteenth century. The figures are rendered with a heraldic flatness and linearity quite distinct from the subtly shaded three-dimensionality of the participants in the Brussels Presentation. In fact, the figure style of the New York-Nuremberg tapestry is that prevailing in the art of the Upper Rhineland during the period from around 1300 to 1350. At its best it is a graceful, delicate style of thin, incorporeal figures with restrained gestures (Figures 7 and 8). At its worst it features stiff, dull figures with restricted contours and angular movements. In either case, the figures tend to be flat and weightless, defined more with line than with light and shadow. The slim, ever-so-slightly swaying figures of the tapestry, their narrow and confined silhouettes, their inclined heads, their arms raised sharply from the elbow and hands cocked back from the wrist are all elements which can be seen again and again in fourteenth-century wall, manuscript, and stained-glass paintings in the Upper Rhine region.16

Certain aspects of the technique of the Crucifixion indicate that it was executed by an artist or artists willing to experiment with different approaches to tapestry weaving. In French and Flemish tapestries the weft was generally woven perpendicular to the warp. German weavers gave less regard to this strict regularity, weaving in some weft threads perpendicular to the warp and others diagonally or on a curve. These eccentric weft threads were especially useful for outlining or for executing details of linear decoration (Figure 10).17 The weavers of the Crucifixion used this technique extensively, with the result that in many places the warp threads are pulled out of their vertical alignment by the slanting weft threads. The earliest surviving French and Flemish tapestries are woven with wool weft threads on a wool warp, and in tapestry centers in France and England regulations...
10. Diagrams of tapestry weave: A. Regular weave, with weft threads perpendicular to warp; B. Regular and eccentric weave, with some slanting weft threads (drawings: Martin)

required that both warp and weft be of wool.\textsuperscript{18} German weavers, on the other hand, used a warp of hemp or linen, as in the Crucifixion.\textsuperscript{19}

Another distinctively German and typically Upper Rhenish feature of the Crucifixion is the use of embroidery for details, a peculiarity seldom found in Franco-Flemish tapestries and later prohibited by some guild regulations.\textsuperscript{20} In the Crucifixion the faces were left blank when the tapestry was woven and the features were added later using the embroidery stitch known as couching. In couching, the design thread is laid on top of the material and is then caught by small stitches at short intervals. The features of the figures in the Crucifixion were outlined with dark brown wool couching threads, with lighter-hued silk couching threads beside them. The original appearance of the faces can only be imagined now, for the brown couching threads have deteriorated to a great extent, leaving only the bits of thread by which they were once attached (Figure 2). Under natural light the slightest pink tinge is evident in the now almost white silk threads, but ultraviolet light brings out more color, indicating that they may originally have been dyed red or pink. The definition of the cheeks of all the figures, with the exception of Christ and the Virgin Mary, by circles of small silk embroidery stitches is now visible only upon close inspection, whereas the saints must once have had the pronounced round cheeks so charmingly featured in later German and Swiss tapestries.\textsuperscript{21} The lips of SS. John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul, which are woven with a vivid red wool, cannot have faded much from their original hue, and may be an indication of the strong color that all the features once had. The red, blue, and green jewels on the crowns of SS. Catherine and Dorothy are embroidered, the jewels on the crowns of SS. Margaret and Agnes woven.

Although couching was used only sparingly on the Crucifixion, certain elements of the design bear a strong resemblance to contemporary works of embroidery. The strong linear definition, totally devoid of shading, of the garments of the three central and four outside figures corresponds to the treatment of drapery in many German embroideries.\textsuperscript{22} No use was made of the tapestry technique of hatching to render a garment in several colors. Hatching avoids the mosaic or stained-glass effect of juxtaposed contrasting color areas by “interpenetrating comb-like processes of adjoining colors [which] produce, at a distance, the effect of a color blend.”\textsuperscript{23} Already in the works of the late fourteenth-century Bataille workshop in Paris hatching was employed to create effects of shading.\textsuperscript{24} In the fifteenth century, Franco-Flemish weavers used the technique more and more extensively, until toward 1500 very subtle effects were achieved by it. The weaver of the Crucifixion was either unfamiliar with

\textsuperscript{18} On the early regulations of the tapestry industry and the rules concerning the use of wool thread, see Thomson, Tapestry, pp. 44, 79.
\textsuperscript{19} Göbel, Wandteppiche III, I, p. 15. According to Göbel (p. 14), German weavers remained occasional laborers without the strength of guilds or the guilds’ guarantee of the quality of work and the continued development of technique.
\textsuperscript{20} Julien Coffinet, Arachne ou l’art de la tapisserie (Paris, 1971) P. 35.
\textsuperscript{21} See Kurth, Bildteppiche, II, pls. 33, 54, 64, 90, 97, 98, 99.
\textsuperscript{22} For other examples of unshaded, strongly outlined drapery in embroideries see Marie Schuette and Sigrid Müller-Christensen, A Pictorial History of Embroidery (New York, 1964) fig. 172, pl. ix.
\textsuperscript{23} Anna G. Bennett, Five Centuries of Tapestry from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (San Francisco, 1976) p. 22, figs. 21, 22.
\textsuperscript{24} Bennett, Five Centuries, fig. 23, illustrations on pp. 4, 31.
the technique or preferred the abstract, patterned effect resulting from a clear differentiation of color areas. In the fifteenth century, Upper Rhenish tapestry weavers continued to prefer the abrupt juxtaposition of colors to the use of hatching.25 The preference for two-dimensional surface designs over a shaded, modeled rendering of figures and draperies is characteristic of medieval German embroideries, particularly of cloister work as opposed to the products of professional embroiderers.26 In some embroidered images the colors of the draperies produce an effect like the garments of the four female martyrs of the New York–Nuremberg tapestry, in which vertical areas of contrasting color resemble bold stripes (Figures 4 and 5).27 The regular, almost geometric pattern of the blood on Christ's body in the Crucifixion panel is also reminiscent of the patterning of human bodies on some German embroideries.28 The striking, starry background of the Crucifixion has parallels in fifteenth-century German embroideries; however, since a background of yellow or gold stars on a blue field was popular in stained-glass, wall, and manuscript painting of the same period, this correspondence should not be stressed.

While few German tapestries woven between 1200 and the late fourteenth century are extant, many embroideries survive from this period, indicating that embroidery was the more extensively practiced art at the time. In German-speaking lands embroidery was often done in convents, and when tapestry weaving became popular it too was practiced by nuns.29 The parallels in drapery style and decorative patterning between the Crucifixion and German embroideries suggest that weavers may have borrowed certain effects from the more familiar textile art of embroidery.

The depiction in the Crucifixion of St. Clare of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan Second Order, the Poor Clares, raises the possibility that the tapestry was woven in a convent of Poor Clares or in a house of the Third Order, a modified lay version of the Franciscan rule. St. Clare appears chiefly in works of art associated with Franciscan convents or churches. Further, she stands out among the eight saints flanking the Crucifixion scene as the only one who was not martyred. The palm branch she holds is not the sign of a martyr's death but of Christian victory, and probably refers to the legend according to which Clare's profession was accepted by St. Francis on Palm Sunday of 1212. Her special attribute is the monstrance containing the Sacred Host with which she confronted and routed from her convent attacking Saracen mercenaries from Frederick II's army.30

The first known house of Poor Clares in the Lake of Constance region was founded in Constance in 1251; in 1259 it moved to Schaffhausen, about twenty-five miles away. In 1309 the German queen, Elisabeth, founded a Franciscan convent in Aargau at Königsfelden. The Poor Clares, however, did not experience much growth around the Lake of Constance or in the greater Upper Rhineland during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.31 In striking contrast, the Third Order of St. Francis was tremendously popular. In the bishopric of Constance alone there were over one hundred such houses in the late...
Middle Ages. Members of these houses were not strictly enclosed and were allowed to work as seculars. As did the Poor Clares, many Franciscan tertiaries supported their houses by handwork—weaving, spinning, and sewing.

Given the Franciscan ideal of poverty, to which St. Clare was passionately devoted, we may ask whether a tapestry is likely to have been produced for the adornment of their convent by Poor Clares or Franciscan tertiaries. By the fourteenth century the Poor Clares had moved far from their founder's ideal of mendicancy. Not only convents but also individual nuns often owned considerable property. Tertiaries, even if personally dedicated to a life of poverty, had never been required by the rule of the Third Order to abandon their wealth. Although I have found no reference to tapestry production or ownership by Poor Clares in the mid-fourteenth century, there is indication of an active painting atelier in a convent of Poor Clares in Nuremberg as early as the 1360s. The embroidered altar frontal from Königsfelden is thought to have been executed in part by Poor Clares of that convent (Figure 5). From the fifteenth century comes the earliest evidence of a tapestry workshop in a house of Poor Clares. Kurth first identified a group of tapestries dating from about 1410 to 1460 as probably originating in the convent of Gnadenital in Basel. One of them, a tapestry of about 1435 which depicts the Death of the Virgin, shows as the donor a kneeling nun in the Franciscan habit, beside her the inscription "Gnadental."

Although it is larger than most of the extant medieval tapestry antependia, the New York–Nuremberg tapestry may have been used as an altar frontal. Inventories reveal that one of the most common subjects of antependia in the fourteenth and following centuries was the crucified Christ flanked by a row of saints. The composition of this Crucifixion, which differentiates the two figures at each end of the row, suggests to me that the tapestry may have been wrapped around three sides of an altar with the end pairs of saints adorning the shorter sides. Against this supposition it must be said that although the use of hangings to cover three or four sides of the altar was the rule in early Christian times, as early as the ninth century adornment of the front only was common and in the late Middle Ages it became the custom. Even if our tapestry was a late survival of the earlier usage, the presence of St. Clare is a difficulty, since she is unlikely to have been relegated to the side of the altar if the tapestry had been woven for use at a Franciscan convent. The same can be said for SS. John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul—all major saints of the Church. Perhaps the panel adorned only the front of an altar. The high altars of the late Middle Ages were quite large, usually ten feet or more in length.

Another possibility is that the tapestry functioned as a reredos which hung on the wall above and behind the altar. Joseph Braun, in his study of the Christian altar and its furnishings, found in French, English, and Flemish inventories frequent mention of such hangings. Although he found no similar reference in German inventories, the oldest example of a textile reredos known to Braun was in fact a woven silk panel of the late thirteenth century from Regensburg Cathedral, which depicts Christ on the cross flanked by the Virgin Mary, St. John, and other fig-

39. If we estimate the original length of the tapestry as 12 ft., then the portions folded around the sides of the altar would have measured in all about 4–5 ft. According to Braun, the high altars of the 14th and 15th centuries were almost always at least 2 m. (6' 6") in width, although many were much larger. Side altars in chapels might be as small as 1.50 m. (4 ft. 11") in width and 0.50 m. (1 ft. 8") in depth [Joseph Braun, Der christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung (Munich, 1924)].
Achim Hubel, conservator of the Regensburg Cathedral treasury, adheres to the theory that this hanging was used as a reredos for the high altar and is thus the earliest extant exemplar of the genre in Germany. One of the most common subjects of reredos hangings, as of antependia, was the crucified Christ, frequently flanked by standing saints. In the New York–Nuremberg tapestry the presence of St. John the Baptist holding the sacrificial lamb and gesturing toward the cross, and of St. Clare with the Host clearly visible in her monstrance, reinforces the Eucharistic symbolism of the Crucifixion.

Apart from its importance as a work of art and as a striking early example of Gothic tapestry weaving, the Crucifixion also represents an iconographic development associated with fourteenth-century German mysticism. One of the manifestations of this was a propensity for images of the suffering Christ, whose body was often shown streaming with blood from the wounds made by the Flagellation, the Crown of Thorns, the nails, and the centurion's spear. The Franciscans cultivated a particular devotion to the Passion of Christ in keeping with the experience of St. Francis, whose sharing of Christ's agony had culminated in his receiving of the stigmata. In its hieratic formality and simplicity of means, the Crucifixion invites the beholder to meditative contemplation. Christ's wounded body inspires empathy; his grieving mother and the saints, bearing witness to the most profound event of the Christian religion, exemplify the kind of faith required of the believer.

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Appendix

THE CONDITION OF THE NEW YORK–NUREMBERG CRUCIFIXION TAPESTRY

Apart from the fact that it is cropped on all four sides, the New York panel is on the whole in a fairly good state of preservation. The upper portion, however, is badly damaged and has been heavily restored, with the stars and loose bits of sky sewn to a fabric backing. The remainder of the tapestry has been resewn in relatively few places where threads were coming unwoven. These restorations are apparent to the naked eye.

The tiny slits in the weaving above and below each
drop of blood on Christ's body may well have been an intentional use of technique to enhance the design. Similar small slits accent the pattern on the lining of the mantles of SS. Dorothy and Margaret. Another effective use of a slit in the weaving is around the neckline of St. Catherine's tunic, where it produces the impression of a crease or shadow.

The blue of the sky and the yellow used for the stars, halos, crowns, St. Catherine's palm, and parts of the robes of SS. Catherine and Margaret have faded unevenly. The cross was probably originally greener but has faded to its present blue-green color owing to the instability of the yellow dye. (It is interesting to note that the Constance Cathedral painting illustrated in Figure 7 features an olive-green cross against a blue background.)

The tunics of St. Catherine and the Virgin Mary, as well as St. John the Evangelist's mantle, are woven with a thread that is slightly coarser and creamier in hue than the other off-white parts of these figures and their garments. Nobuko Kajitani, Textile Conservator at the Metropolitan Museum, has pointed out to me that this creamy color sometimes results from the extreme fading of threads dyed with archil or brazilwood; the color obtained from these dyes is wine or brownish red, and at the lower edge of St. John's mantle a hint of reddish brown is visible. If the cream garments were indeed such a shade originally, the tapestry would have been much more colorful and the figure of the Virgin Mary in particular would have been more striking. Reds produced from other dyes remain relatively bright and unfaded, as in St. John's tunic and St. Margaret's mantle, both woven in two shades of red.

Parts of St. John's mantle, as well as St. Margaret's cross, are woven in an extremely pale blue, scarcely visible except under strong light. Without an examination of the reverse side of the tapestry or a chemical analysis of the threads it is impossible to know to what extent the cream and pale blue areas have faded.

The four stars to the right of St. Margaret's head were painted onto the fabric where none existed before; this may have been done at the time the tapestry was divided, in order to "complete" the picture. Their color is now a pasty gray.

The Nuremberg panels are in a worse state of preservation than the central portion. Since the photograph reproduced in Figure 3 was made, the accumulation of dust on the surface has obscured some of the finer features of the tapestry, which is so fragile that cleaning is not desirable. Because of its deteriorated condition the tapestry is no longer displayed in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum.

Restored areas are badly discolored and jarring. Leonie von Wickens, Textile Curator of the museum, believes that these restorations had already been made when the tapestry entered the museum sometime between 1852 and 1856. Across the top of the tapestry the sky has been re-woven with a thread which has faded to a paler blue, while many of the stars were re-woven in part with a thread now off-white. Between SS. Agnes and Dorothy, where the two panels are sewn together, runs a strip which is entirely re-woven with a thread now faded to pale blue. The stars in this strip are white. Part of Dorothy's right arm has also been re-woven. All the figures have undergone some degree of restoration with threads which are now either white or mustard-yellow. The figure of St. Clare, for example, has a white patch on her halo and large mustard-colored patches on her dark blue veil and blue-green palm branch.

The features of the figures have deteriorated further than those in the New York panel. St. John the Baptist's beard, which looks so odd in photographic reproduction, appears more natural in reality; it is accented along the jawbone and around the mouth by alternating stripes of off-white and light brown.

As with the off-white or cream-colored robes of several figures in the New York panel, those of John the Baptist and Paul were woven with a slightly coarser thread than their skin. The fabric backing of the tapestry is not attached along its lower border, so that it is possible to see part of the reverse side. St. John's garment has a slightly red cast on the reverse, indicating again that some of the off-white areas may have been woven with threads dyed with brazilwood or some other equally unstable dye. A gray-lavender ply of gray, pink, and blue-gray strands was used for the lower parts of the tunics of SS. Clare and Paul. On the reverse side these areas are darker shades of purple, while St. Clare's mantle is brown rather than pale tan as on the front of the tapestry.

A curious feature is the use of a different color—a shade of brown instead of the dark blue used elsewhere in the New York—Nuremberg tapestry—to outline the figure of St. Paul, St. Peter's left arm and hand, and the left portion of St. Peter's halo.