

Temporary Exhibition

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Gothic Tapestries
1920

AN EXHIBITION OF
GOTHIC TAPESTRIES OF
FRANCE AND FLANDERS

APRIL TWENTY-TWO TO MAY SIXTEEN
NINETEEN HUNDRED AND TWENTY



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The cartoons of Raphael, sent by the Pope in 1515 to be woven in Brussels, mark the change in the character of tapestry design. Purists consider that this dates the beginning of decline in the art; it is certain that the strong decorative quality, the vigorous design, the superbly frank coloration were largely lost as technical improvements increased. The tapestries in the present exhibition are all in the pure Gothic traditional style.

Tapestry is a fabric made by passing vertical threads alternately under and over a series of horizontal linen or hemp threads, so that the latter are not seen, but only marked by the horizontal ribs. The verticals are of wool, though occasionally silk, gold or silver threads give added richness. In early work very few colors are used; hatchings, the running of lines of one tone or color up into the body of another, give shading without the introduction of an intermediate.

Weaving of this kind was known to ancient civilizations. Arachne, because she wove more beautifully than Pallas, patroness of the art, was changed into a spider by the goddess. The Odyssey tells of Helen of Troy weaving the story of her own life. However, it was fourteenth and fifteenth century Europe which produced the finest tapestries we know. They are characterized by the absence of or narrowness of borders, the covering of the entire surface with interesting design, the high horizon line, and the absence of naturalistic perspective; their strong decorative quality is due to these conventions.

Perhaps it was in the monasteries, from which came most of the culture of the time, that the first tapestries were made. Like the illuminated manuscripts, church glass, and carved portals glorifying religion, they taught biblical history; clothed in contemporary garments, the characters of ancient stories were vivified. In any case, it was in that great, fruitful period of the Middle Ages that the art and industry grew until hundreds of thousands of workmen were employed on its

looms. As early as 1382 it is known that there were fifty thousand workmen in the little town of Louvain, although that was not the greatest center of the industry.

The earliest tapestries may have been made in Germany, but the industry never flourished there. England exported the wool to Flanders, but gave little encouragement to home production before the founding of the Mortlake works in 1619. In Italy there were no important works until the sixteenth century. Flanders and France were the great producers, furnishing the whole civilized world. The famous Angers set was commenced on the Parisian looms of Nicholas Bataille in 1378. There were looms in smaller towns, such as Aubusson, where the industry is said to have been started by Saracens from the army defeated at Tours by Charles Martel. Flanders under the Dukes of Burgundy surpassed all other countries, and had more workmen on the looms than any but our greatest modern industries employ. Tournai, Brussels and Arras were the great centers.

The hangings were used to beautify the walls of dwellings, to ornament the churches, to deck the streets on great occasions, even on the battle field to enrich the tent of such a warrior as Charles the Bold. By the stories of old chroniclers, we can visualize them in the environment for which they were made, and appreciate better their place in the life of the period. A piece of circumstantial evidence against Mary Queen of Scots was the fact that on the Friday before the murder she had replaced a good set by a second best in the room in which Darnley was to be killed. As wall coverings they went completely around the room and were loosely hung; behind them Polonius was hiding when Hamlet stabbed him.

It is impossible to date accurately more than a very few early hangings, and the designers of the cartoons are for the most part unknown; therefore we have all the more time to give to the study of the intrinsic beauty of the material and design.



THE CRUCIFIXION [No. 2]

[1]

XV CENTURY, FRANCE, "Mille fleur."

This weave is typical of the thousand flower design, which is often used to fill in the background of figured hangings, or frequently as a simple stuff for rooms, furniture, or bed covering. As this hangs, it is like a meadow which one looks down upon and sees in exquisite detail.

(5'-6" x 7'-3").

[2]

XV CENTURY, FRANCE. "The Crucifixion."

The separation of the personages outlined against a mille fleur background, and the long narrow shape of the panel are commonly found in early work. Germany produced many similar, with harsh notes of white and the names of the figures written in Gothic characters on scrolls.

Below the cross are the Magdalen and Joseph of Arimathea, the Virgin and St. John on either side, and three kneeling figures of nuns, evidently the donors. It was probably made as a gift to a church or convent.

(6'-1" x 3'-2").

XIV CENTURY, FRANCE. "The Annunciation."

Such an example of Gothic workmanship is very rare. In dating it from the close of the XIV Century, it may be compared with the set at Angers Cathedral made about 1381 for Louis of Anjou. It is pure wool without metallic thread, technically perfect: The story is presented with great force and simplicity: the colors are of an extraordinary freshness and power.

The Son, as a child already bearing the cross, is sent from God the Father at the moment when the Holy Spirit enters the room as a dove, and the Angel appears to the Virgin with thumb and two fingers (symbolizing the Trinity) raised in blessing. As in a modern cartoon, the words of the Angel "Ave gratia plena" are written on a band issuing from the figure, and the swift flight of the dove is indicated by slanting lines. In the center at the top two angels support the coat-of-arms of the owner.

(9'-6" x 11'-4").

EARLY XVI CENTURY, FLANDERS. "A Royal Betrothal."

From the Octagon Tower of Skipton Castle, Yorkshire, England.

To the ancient castle built in the eleventh century, the tenth baron Clifford added the Octagon tower during the first years of the Tudors, and covered the walls of the great hall with tapestries. This one was probably woven in Brussels about 1500, as illustration to an unidentified romance. At the left, the King is receiving the suitor with hand extended in greeting, though his eyes are fastened on the gifts brought him; the princess and others of the court are curiously watching. The succeeding incidents are shown in groups which melt one into the other, though the general composition is divided into two horizontal bands of figures.

(19'-9" x 8'-2").



ECCE HOMO [No. 6]

Faint, illegible text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.

XV CENTURY, FLANDERS. "The Tower of Jealousy."

From Skipton Castle, Yorkshire, England.

Probably woven in Tournay about 1480 from French cartoons. Others of the set are in the town hall of Issoire and the Cathedral of Zamora. This set is in illustration of the famous French "Romance of the Rose," which Chaucer translated into English. The prisoners are being tortured by their gaolers, while gorgeously dressed women look down on them pityingly from a gallery. In the right hand portion the women destroy the tower with their own hands. The gorgeous costumes and sumptuous details deserve close study.

(20'-4" x 8'-5").

EARLY XVI CENTURY, FLANDERS. "Ecce Homo."

From the J. P. Morgan Collection.

De Ricci believes the design is derived from an earlier composition by a pupil of Rogier de la Pasture, and dates it from the end of the 15th Century. Valentiner reproduces an engraving by Van Leyden of the same subject in which several of the figures are almost identical, simply reversed in printing. In the lower left corner are David and Nebuchadnezzar, introducing the subject. Through a window Christ is seen praying in the garden; then Pilate points to the other prisoners and offers Christ for release. Immediately behind this, Pilate, looking at his wife, washes his hands of the judgment. The Bearing of the Cross, The Arrest of Simon, and the Crucifixion, are in the upper right hand corner.

This "Ecce Homo" is one of the rare renderings of the subject, and was woven in late XV or early XVI Century, probably by the weaver of the scene from the life of the Virgin, a tapestry hanging in Saragossa Cathedral.

(11'-6" x 13'-5").



THE KNIGHT'S VOW [No. 7]

[7]

XVI CENTURY, FLANDERS. "The Knight's Vow."

From the J. P. Morgan Collection.

The tapestry is divided into five portions by a jewelled frame. The subjects are from an unidentified romance, probably referring to the conferring of knighthood upon a young man. The lower right panel shows him receiving wine after the vigil; the upper his vow before the altar: on the left women present him with a sword and the collar of the order; below he receives his letters patent of nobility. His marriage is apparently the subject of the center panel, where in the lower corner another woman is either wounded with sudden love by the arrow of a flying cupid, or is reproaching him with incidents of his youth.

(22'-9" x 13'-10").



PASSION AND TRIUMPH OF THE REDEEMER [No. 8]

[8]

XVI CENTURY, FLANDERS. "The Passion and Triumph of the Redeemer."

In the left upper corner are two holy men saying "This is the Son of God whom envious men crucified." In succession are shown:—Pilate; The Bearing of the Cross with allegorical figures of Envy, Humility and Charity: The Crucifixion: The Burial: The Triumph of the Faithful: The Enthronement. In the last scene Christ receives into heaven a saint, possibly the patron of the donor. Below this, the prophet Hosea points to the scene above and says "Oh death, where are thy plagues?" (Hosea XIII: 14).

(15'-2" x 13'-0").

XV CENTURY, FRANCE OR FLANDERS. "The Triumph of Time."

This and the following number illustrate Petrarch's "Triumph." The Imperial Austrian collection contains the complete set of six from the same designs as these, and one of Fame was in the Somzee sale. Two other later sets are known, which were inspired by these.

Fame in a wonderful dress, trimmed with argus-eyed ostrich plumes, is drawn in her chariot by elephants, a cock, and a bat. The Fates, Atropos and Clotho, lie on the ground below the figure of Charlemagne. Plato, Aristotle and Alexander are behind the chariot against an exquisite background of landscape. The last line only of the inscription in French appears in the sky. In full it reads:

"From earth comes lofty fame,
Atropos and her two sisters to subdue,
For chastity she has willed to avenge,
Through her power as dame of high esteem."

(10'-9" x 11'-7").

XV CENTURY, FRANCE OR FLANDERS. "The Triumph of Fame."

Father Time is drawn by antlered deer, a crow, and a hen turkey. Fame is laid low on the ground. Mathusalem, Nestor, Noah, and Adam walk beside the chariot. Allegorical representatives of time are in the upper part below the full text of the inscription:

"Time aroused by contentions below,
Old and broken and fearless of any armed force,
To fame has caused many alarms,
And from the highest point has brought her low."

(12'-4" x 11'-7").



SOLOMON AND THE QUEEN OF SHEBA [No. 11]

[11]

XV CENTURY, FLANDERS. "Solomon and the Queen of Sheba."

This gorgeous tapestry is perhaps the finest rendering we know of a subject evidently much in demand. It gave scope for the richest possible treatment of costumes and accessories; not only the garments, but every bit of furniture is covered with jewels, and the richness of the recurring and varying pomegranate pattern is notable. Hunter attributes this to a German loom without reason and the very similar one in the Poldi Pezzoli museum at Milan to a Flemish.

(13'-5" x 11'-7").



THE CREDO [No. 12]

[12]

XVI CENTURY, FLANDERS. "The Credo."

From the J. P. Morgan Collection.

De Ricci dates this in the middle of the XV century and believes it was woven in Champagne or Burgundy. Although we know that the Apostles Creed was a favorite subject, this is the only complete tapestry representing it, and is extraordinarily interesting. The scenes are separated by frames of an architectural character in the following order:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth / and in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord / who was conceived by the Holy Ghost / born of the Virgin Mary / suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified / died and buried / He descended into Hell / The third day he rose again from the dead / He ascended into Heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty / from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost / The Holy Catholic Church, The Communion of Saints / The forgiveness of sins / The resurrection of the body / and life everlasting.

(16'-1" x 11'-6").

SCULPTURE, NEEDLEWORK, AND
MISCELLANEOUS OBJECTS

[13]

ST. CATHARINE OF ALEXANDER. XV century Spanish carved and polychromed wood figure. She holds a book in her left hand whilst her right hand clasps the hilt of a sword.

5'-4" high.

[14]

SAINT IN ARMOR. XV century German carved wood statue. The figure holds a box, and is in the act of pouring water therefrom upon the flames of the burning building at his side.

2'-11" high.

[15]

VIRGIN AND CHILD. XV century French carved and painted wood figure.

3'-3" high.

[16]

ANGELS WITH MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS. XV century French. Limestone bas-relief, (pair).
From the Collection of La Brouse Tours.

[17]

SAINT IN ARMOR. Early XV century German carved wood figure holding in left hand a miniature church.

5'-5" high.

[18]

SAINT LUKE. XV century Spanish, carved and polychrome wood. Seated at the desk writing with open book before him; underneath the desk is the figure of an ox.

[19]

ST. FIACRE. XV century French carved stone statue of patron saint of agriculture. Saint holds a book in his right hand, while his left rests upon the handle of a spade.

[20]

PHILIP THE GOOD AND ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST. Burgundian Gothic stone group.

[21]

LECTERN. XV century Spanish. Iron, with leather book-rest. This type of lectern was used by the clergy on the field of battle.

[22]

STAINED GLASS WINDOW. XV century French. Five panels:

Christ on the Cross, and four angels receiving the precious blood of the hands and feet of the Saviour (center).

The Virgin in attitude of prayer (left).

St. John with head reclined (right).

St. Paul with sword in hand (extreme left).

A bishop (extreme right).

[23]

CHASUBLE. XV century Italian crimson velvet with pomegranate design; center panels worked in gold thread and silk embroidered orphreys showing architectural niches in which are represented various saints.

[24]

CHASUBLE. Late XV century Italian red velvet with pomegranate design. The center orphreys of gold and silk portray various characters including the Virgin and Child, St. Michael and the Demon, and St. Peter, in architectural niches; above each are elaborate gold scrolls on blue ground.

PROCESSIONAL CROSS. XV century English Gothic.

Gold embroidered brocade, the cross worked solid in multicolor silks on a diapered ground of gold threads; at the intersection medallion encloses standing figure of the Virgin and Child, and the Holy Father; in the horizontal panels of the cross are two kneeling angels; below, in architectural niches, are St. John with a lamb, and St. Anne with a sword.

The cross is mounted on a panel of apple green Venetian brocade of the period, with pineapple motives.





