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# European Tapestries: History, Conservation, and Creation

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The textile art of tapestry is one that has had relevance in society since antiquity. This simple technique of textile construction was developed independently in many areas around the world in ancient times. Coptic tapestries from around the 6<sup>th</sup> century in Egypt are the oldest evidence that exists today of tapestry as an ancient art form. These pieces are small in size, made from linen and wool, and most often displayed fish and Greek inspired motifs. Peruvian tapestries also display a skillful weaving process that focused on geometric designs. Chinese tapestries, known as k'o-ssu, were also created. These pieces displayed floral patterns made entirely from silk. As the technique developed, tapestry became the useful art of the Middle Ages in Europe. The tradition of European tapestry art is one that flourished between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The art transitioned as it gained in popularity from the use of stagnant figures and plain compositions in Middle Ages to detailed and intricate creations that could easily be mistaken for paintings during the Renaissance. Tapestries in Europe served many functions in society and was seen as a prestigious symbol of status because of their sheer size as well as the large amounts of time and money that went into their creation. Unfortunately, the art of tapestry weaving became almost obsolete in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the invention of the jacquard loom, which simplified and sped up the weaving process. Today European tapestries are much revered for their impressive construction and impeccable technique for such an early period in time.

Tapestry is a form of woven textile fabric, created when a colored weft yarn passes over a warp yarn and under the next warp yarn repeatedly until that color is no

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longer required, at which time the sequence is reversed in the opposing direction.<sup>1</sup> The warp yarns are stretched tightly in a vertical direction and held around top beams, a warp beam, which is the top beam and the cloth beam which is on the bottom. In the weaving process the warp-faced yarns are completely covered by the weft yarns, which is a characteristic unique to tapestry.<sup>2</sup> The warp-faced yarns create vertical ridges or ribs in the tapestry. Tapestry creation is a process that requires artists and weavers to work together to complete a finished piece that was the artist's original cartoon design. The weaver uses the weft yarns to recreate the cartoon designed by the artist. As stated by Cavallo in *Tapestries of Europe and Colonial Peru*, a tapestry fabric is made up of many separate units of weft-faced yarns whose shape and color are dependent on the pattern they are desired to create.<sup>3</sup> This process creates a mosaic like fabric when looked at closely but a defined pictorial image when looked at farther away.

Weaving as a method of fabric construction has been in practice since before 6000 B.C.E. originally developed to create mats, baskets, and nets.<sup>4</sup> Ancient forms of tapestry have been identified in Egyptian, Peruvian, and Chinese civilizations. The loom is a simple and useful tool that has not changed in basic structure since its prehistoric invention.<sup>5</sup> Creating a tapestry is a long tedious process that would not be possible without the loom. The main purpose of the loom is to hold the warp yarns evenly, without tangling, and under tension, while the weft yarns are interlaced. The type of loom most often used in weaving European tapestries is known as a high warp loom. A high-

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<sup>1</sup> Adolf Cavallo, *Tapestries of Europe and Colonial Peru in the Museum of Fine Arts* (Massachusetts: Museum of Fine Arts, 1967) 11-13

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>4</sup> Kax Wilson, *A History of Textiles* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1979) 35-38.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 35.

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warp loom is characterized by the warp yarns that are being stretched vertically along the top and bottom rollers. The warp yarns are divided into two sets of yarns, odd and even, and are attached to a heddle rod. Heddles are used on looms to separate and guide the warp threads and make a path for the shuttle to interlace the weft yarns.<sup>6</sup>

The first step in tapestry weaving is warping the loom. Warping the loom consists of preparing the warp yarns and positioning them vertically on the loom.<sup>7</sup> The second step in the weaving process is called shedding; during this step the warp yarns are lifted by raising the heddle rods to form a shed.<sup>8</sup> A shed is a triangular space between the raised warp yarns and the warp yarns that are kept in place. Changing the shed alternates which group of warp yarns are brought to the front. The weaver uses a bobbin, which is a spool with the colored yarns wrapped around it, to weave in the weft yarns.<sup>9</sup> The weaver passes the bobbin from left to right and then grasps the heddle rod to pull the back series of threads to the front and then passes the bobbin back again between the two series from right to left.<sup>10</sup> After two passages of the bobbin the weaver uses the end of the bobbin or a comb to beat down the newly placed weft-faced yarns.<sup>11</sup> In order to make sure the weft yarns are all tightly packed and there are no open spaces, weavers use the end of the bobbin or a comb to beat down each row of weft yarns to meet the row below.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>7</sup> Julien Coffinet and Maurice Pianzola, *Craft and Art: Tapestry* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1974) 18-21.

<sup>8</sup> Kax Wilson, *A History of Textiles* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1979) 36.

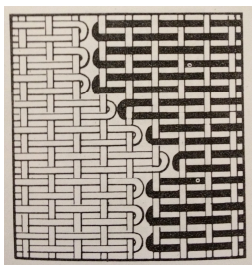
<sup>9</sup> Adolf Cavallo, *Tapestries of Europe and Colonial Peru in the Museum of Fine Arts* (Massachusetts: Museum of Fine Arts, 1967) 11-13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 14.

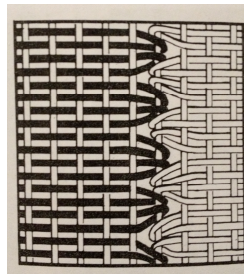
<sup>11</sup> Madeline Jarry, *World Tapestry: From its Origins to the Present* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1969) 343-345.

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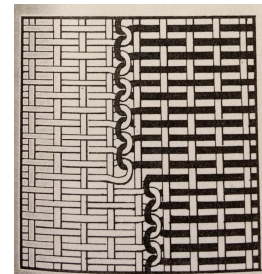
Tapestries produced on a high-warp loom are woven so that the final piece is hung with the warp-faced yarns in a horizontal direction, they create ribs running horizontally through the tapestry. This means that weavers are weaving a cartoon for the tapestry that is rotated ninety degrees and is on its side. “This method of weaving makes it possible to make larger copies of paintings, usually wider than higher, and the horizontal ribs create shadows that help round and blend figures into continuous scenes. Unfortunately, the tapestry is less durable hung this way.”<sup>12</sup> When the weaver is changing color in the weft yarns and he ends two or more duties along the same warp yarn without interlocking it with another color, a slit will occur. Slits are a structurally weak part of the tapestry and this portion is subject to slippage if put under too much tension. In order to prevent the creation of slits, tapestry weavers use multiple techniques to join where two color areas meet. Dovetailing is when the weft yarns are turned in pairs alternately around a common warp yarn. Interlocking is when the weft yarns of one color are linked together around the end of the weft yarns of the adjacent color, creating a lock.<sup>13</sup>



Slit Tapestry



Dovetailing



Interlocking

Although tapestry weaving as an art form has been around since ancient times, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century the European tradition of tapestry became a firmly established practice.

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<sup>12</sup> Adolf Cavallo, *Tapestries of Europe and Colonial Peru in the Museum of Fine Arts* (Massachusetts: Museum of Fine Arts, 1967) 204.

<sup>13</sup> Kax Wilson, *A History of Textiles* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1979) 24-27.

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Tapestry in the 14<sup>th</sup> century had a few different functions and was seen as a luxury art reserved for Church patrons and the aristocratic classes of this time period.<sup>14</sup> These massive art works served as decoration for churches and castles. Tapestry art was created to decorate a certain wall and were constructed with those exact dimensions, because of this tapestries range in sizes and are often broken up into multiple sections. The aristocracy and royal families of this century were enthralled with tapestry art because of the status symbol that accompanies their sheer magnitude, “ownership of tapestries was a real matter of prestige.”<sup>15</sup> Collections of hundreds of tapestries could belong to just one aristocratic family. These pieces would be stored in a ‘wardrobe’ and brought out to decorate for special occasions such as weddings, christenings, or funerals.<sup>16</sup> Tapestry was also the classic diplomatic gift for centuries and kings and noblemen would commission pieces to be given to other leaders, as it was seen as the highest level of appreciation.<sup>17</sup> Phillip the Bold, duke of Burgundy, was seen to be a major proponent of tapestry art, which contained figurative messages in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. The duke commissioned a set depicting the *Journey of Charlemagne to Jerusalem* for his daughter’s wedding as well as *the Life of Alexander the Great* to give as ransom to the Turks for his son who was captured in battle.<sup>18</sup> The size and expense that is inherent in commissioning a tapestry forces it to be reserved for the highest classes of European society who utilize this art form to perpetuate their status.

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<sup>14</sup> Julien Coffinet and Maurice Pianzola, *Craft and Art: Tapestry* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1974) 66.

<sup>15</sup> Guy Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry: From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. (Belgium: Lannoo Publishers, 1999) 16.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 28.

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In addition to being used as a symbol of power, tapestry also served a functional purpose in 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The upper classes were mobile and constantly moved between their multiple castles. They would take all of their furniture with them; this included rolling up their tapestries and transporting them to their new castle. Tapestry is a portable and practical art, seen as a “mobile fresco.”<sup>19</sup> Tapestries were also able to help provide insulation for the drafty homes in medieval times. Tapestry rooms were a popular concept during this time period where one room was cut off from the rest of the house and the walls covered by large wall hangings, a practical way to achieve warmth.<sup>20</sup> The popularity of tapestry can be attributed to its relevance in the time period that it was most revered. The upper classes were able to display their wealth on beautiful art that decorated their walls, was easily movable and portable from place to place, and conserved the heat in their homes.

Commissioned tapestry sets required sometimes years of labor-intensive work and were very expensive to produce. Thomas Campbell from the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art states that, “A large tapestry, five yards high by eight yards wide, woven in wool alone, with a warp count of approximately fifteen per inch, would have taken five weavers some eight months or so to weave...excluding the cost and time involved in the design and preparation of the cartoons and setting up the loom.”<sup>21</sup> The materials used determined the cost. At this time wool was typically used, but in later centuries silver and gold gilt silk was often incorporated into the tapestry. Finer tapestries were more expensive because they require

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Campbell, “How Medieval and Renaissance Tapestries Were Made’: Helibrunn Timeline of Art History, 2008. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tapm/hd\\_tapm.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tapm/hd_tapm.htm)

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more threads per inch, using more material than coarser tapestries, which require less threads per inch.<sup>22</sup> These massive pieces of art were labor and time intensive and carried with them a significant price.

Cities in Europe that were known for their thriving textile industries, such as Paris and Arras, France, began to utilize the raw materials that their towns had at their disposal and were logical city centers to begin tapestry manufacturing. Tapestry manufactories in cities such as Paris and Arras worked on commissions from Church patrons and those of the aristocratic classes. In the early 14<sup>th</sup> century plant motifs and repetitive decorative patterns were popular tapestry designs.<sup>23</sup> Yet toward the later half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century more detailed tapestries began to be created. As stated in *Tapestries of the Lowlands*, there are eight common themes that tapestry art utilized; early heroic songs, illustrations of well known stories of legends, events from Antiquity, contemporary occurrences, scenes from religious literature, reflection of the times and court customs, fables and satires, and delineation of a families coat of arms. The pieces created during this time period revealed a “sense of aristocratic superiority and repelling of the broad masses of people.”<sup>24</sup> In *The Arts and Crafts of Tapestry* Coffinet states that in the 14<sup>th</sup> century “tapestries held a mirror to the events and society of their time, as seen by the rich, naturally, which means a prettying mirror.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Julien Coffinet and Maurice Pianzola, *Craft and Art: Tapestry* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1974) 66.

<sup>23</sup> Madeline Jarry, *World Tapestry: From its Origins to the Present* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1969) 29.

<sup>24</sup> Heinrich Gobel, *Tapestries of the Lowlands* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1974) 23

<sup>25</sup> Julien Coffinet and Maurice Pianzola, *Craft and Art: Tapestry* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1974) 78.



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Many tapestries from this time period have not survived which can be contributed to many circumstances. The warring times of this century meant that these artworks changed ownership frequently, and their portability created a lot of wear and tear that shortened their lifespan.<sup>26</sup> Political unrest and changes in power lead to destruction of tapestries as well as, entire sets in the royal collections. For example, tapestry collections of Flemish descent were burned to recover the gold and silver in the weft.<sup>27</sup> The physical construction of tapestry weaving also lends itself to their shorter lifespan. Tapestries are woven on a loom where the vertical, warp-faced yarns hold the tension and have the most strength. The image is constructed at a ninety degree on the horizontal, weft yarns. The finished tapestry is hung by the weft-faced yarns, which are the weaker part of the fabric. Along with there being limited examples of medieval European tapestry that exist today, there is also a limited amount of information exists about tapestry creation in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Tapestry pieces commissioned for the Church are better documented because of old inventories and contemporary account books that have documentation of the commission of these pieces.<sup>28</sup> Even with these inventories, most information is incomplete and it is not always known in what tapestry manufactory a specific piece was made, or by or for whom it was created for. With these missing pieces of information, much speculation has come into play. The remaining existing tapestries of this time period have been studied and compared to one another and works have been credited to weavers where similar artistic elements are similarly constructed in two separate pieces.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Guy Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry: From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. (Belgium: Lannoo Publishers, 1999) 17.

<sup>28</sup> Heinrich Gobel, *Tapestries of the Lowlands* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1974) 23.

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Nicolas Bataille, a Paris citizen, merchant, and manufacturer, is said to be the supplier of tapestry to the royal families and noble classes in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and worked closely with multiple commercial weavers in Paris and Arras.<sup>29</sup> Bataille is estimated to have been the middleman for 250 tapestry commissions, his most famous commission being the *Angers Apocalypse*. Said to be the “Sistine Chapel of wool,” the *Angers Apocalypse* was woven in Paris for Duke Louis of Anjou estimated between 1377 and 1380.<sup>30</sup> The *Angers Apocalypse* is a set of six tapestries each stretching 20 feet high and 78 feet wide and in total displaying 90 scenes, alternating black and blue backgrounds between scenes. The series tells the story of the apocalyptic events from Saint John’s prophetic visions in the New Testament. Jan Bondolf, who was the court painter to King Charles V, designed it. It is believed that Bondolf’s cartoons for the *Apocalypse* tapestries were inspired by an illuminated manuscript from the thirteenth century given to him by King Charles V.<sup>31</sup> Allegories related to the apocalypse were a very popular inspiration in the Middle Ages for all forms of art including painting and sculpture. The symbolism behind these tapestries deals with the repetitive use in the number seven throughout the set, which is believed to symbolize perfection. Only 71 out of the 90 scenes survive today and are displayed in Angers, France in the Musée de la Tapisserie at the Château d'Angers.

Similar to the *Angers Apocalypse* is *The Nine Heroes* tapestries, now displayed at The Cloisters Museum in New York. Both are illustrations of written texts and are designed to display a story. *The Nine Heroes* tapestries are often attributed to the weaving

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<sup>29</sup> Madeline Jarry, *World Tapestry: From its Origins to the Present* (New York: G.P.Putnam’s Sons, 1969) 29.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 32.

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factory of Nicolas Bataille because of its similarities with the *Angers Apocalypse*. Both tapestries have constructed their figures in a similar style, with similar artistic elements, and similar color palettes with gray, black, red, pink, and dark blue. Without clear documentation it cannot be known for sure, but color, style, and technique are all used in determining tapestry origin. The duke, Jean de Berry, around approximately 1385, commissioned *The Nine Heroes*. The theme of *The Nine Heroes* is chivalric and the three separate tapestries in the set each symbolize three different types of heroes, each tapestry originally measured 21 by 16 feet. One panel shows three Christian heroes: King Arthur, Charlemagne, and Godfrey De Bouillon. Another panel shows three Hebrew heroes: David, Joshua, and Judas, while another shows three pagan heroes: Hector, Alexander, and Caesar. The Story of The Nine Heroes became a popularized tale in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was appreciated by the nobility during this time. The poem was written by Jacques de Longuyon, who created this story as an allegory of good government, also utilized the symbolic idea of the number three and because of this identified three heroes in three different categories.<sup>32</sup> While visiting The Cloisters Museum and viewing these tapestries first hand I realized many interesting details about this set. Each of the heroes is shown in contemporary garb of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as opposed to the costume of the time period that each hero existed in. They are also all crowned and sitting in thrones, which are positioned in Gothic styled niches. The tapestries are also a symbol of medieval court life. Each portrays not only the hero on the throne centered in the tapestry, showing high society but also depicts lower society, such as the musicians, archers, knights, and attendants that are in the alcoves on the sides of the tapestries. *The Nine Heroes* tapestry

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 32.

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set is one of the oldest examples of European tapestry and offers a perspective of the values held in medieval culture.

One of the most famous, yet mysterious, tapestries of Medieval Europe is the set of six unicorn tapestries, *The Lady with the Unicorn*. Thought to be created between 1480 and 1490, it was designed in the popular French tapestry style, mille fleur.<sup>33</sup> Mille fleur tapestries are characterized by the figures of the tapestry being placed against a field of juxtaposed flowers that occupy the entire background.<sup>34</sup> Each of the six tapestries portrays a woman centered in the middle accompanied by a maiden, a unicorn, and a lion all positioned on a blue-green island. Along with the clusters of flowers, the deep red mille fleur background is also spotted with small animals. Now at the Musée de Cluny in Paris, the set of six tapestries have received much discussion surrounding their symbolic meaning. It is most commonly believed that the set is a representation for the five senses. Taste is portrayed by the woman dipping her hand into a bowl, sight is shown by the woman holding a mirror to the unicorn, hearing is shown by the woman playing the organ, touch is displayed by the woman touching the unicorn's horn, while the sense of smell is shown by the women smelling a flower. The sixth tapestry in this set illustrates the woman placing a necklace in a small coffin that is inscribed with the translated phrase 'free will.' It is believed that this sixth tapestry may be a symbol for a sixth sense of a spiritual heart. Little is known about the origin of *The Lady with the Unicorn* tapestries,

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<sup>33</sup> Adolf Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999). 94 – 99.

<sup>34</sup> Genevieve Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry From the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century*, (Paris, 1978).

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but its mille fleur composition makes it often attributed to the Loire River workshop in Paris.<sup>35</sup>

Approximately fifteen years after the creation of *The Lady with the Unicorn* tapestries, another set of unicorn tapestries were woven. These tapestries are now on permanent display at the Cloisters, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's medieval branch located in Upper Manhattan. There are seven tapestries in this collection but it is believed that they are from three separate sets. The main four tapestries in the set illustrate the hunt of the unicorn. They are believed to have been woven in southern Netherlands between 1495 and 1505. The set depicts hunters and their hounds during each stage of the hunt, which is believed to be an allegory for the Passions of the Christ. In the first tapestry, *The Unicorn is Found*, the central motif shows the unicorn dipping his horn into the stream of water coming from the marbled fountain. This has been seen to symbolize that the unicorn, Christ, "takes on the sins of Man, and so purifies him, in order to bring about redemption."<sup>36</sup> The other evidence that we have is the red cabbage rose bush placed directly behind the unicorn, which is a symbol for martyrdom.<sup>37</sup> The scene displayed in the second tapestry of this set, *The Unicorn Leaps out of the Stream*, shows the unicorn having leapt into a stream to escape the hunt but was followed by the hounds and is shown with an initial bleeding wound. The third piece, *The Unicorn at Bay*, displays the height of the hunt. As the unicorn is trying to escape, the hunters surrounding him, he stabs one of the greyhounds with his horn. To the left side of the tapestry one of the hunters is blowing a horn and has 'Hail, Queen of Heavens' inscribed

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<sup>35</sup> Madeline Jarry, *World Tapestry: From its Origins to the Present* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1969) 116.

<sup>36</sup> Adolf Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999). 57.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

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on his sword's sheath. This is thought to be a representation of the archangel of Gabriel.<sup>38</sup> The final tapestry, *The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle*, displays the final two scenes of the hunt. In the upper left of the tapestry the unicorn is surrounded by hunters who pierce the creature with their spears in its neck and chest. In the foreground of the piece the unicorn is slung on the back of a horse and is being marched to the castle where a crowd awaits. The symbolism displayed in this scene is the wreath of oak branches and thorns that has been placed around the neck of the unicorn. The evidence is clear that these four tapestries are from the same set because of the similarities in the construction of the figures and the composition of the design. Each tapestry also displays the monogram of AE. It is unclear exactly what the AE monogram signifies. Some believe that the cipher refers to Anne of Brittany and that the tapestry set was created to celebrate the marriage of Anne of Brittany and King Louis XII of France in 1499; this fits within the time period that these tapestries were constructed.<sup>39</sup> Even with some evidence pointing towards this, there is so much unknown about the tapestries that it remains a mystery.

Also displayed at the Cloisters are *The Start of the Hunt* and *The Unicorn in Captivity*. These two tapestries are very different in composition from the tapestries that make up *The Hunt of the Unicorn* and are made in the mille fleur style, yet all six of these tapestries display the unknown AE monogram, meaning in some way they are connected. The AE monogram is knotted together each time it is displayed, this is thought to signify marriage.<sup>40</sup> The two tapestries are dated have been woven between 1495 and 1505 in

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 34.

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Southern Netherlands. This set is composed with the same mille fleur background as *The Lady with the Unicorn* set. In *The Start of the Hunt* the hunters and their hounds are placed in the center composition, as the scout is perched up in a tree toward the right signaling the hunting party. It is clear that there would have been one or more pieces within this set showing the finding and capturing of the unicorn before its captivity in the final tapestry.<sup>41</sup> It was a popular tale that the unicorn could not be caught because it was a swift and wild creature. The only way to capture a unicorn was to have a maiden subdue the creature. This could be achieved by leaving a maiden alone in the forest. The untamable beast would approach her and go to sleep with its head on the maiden's lap, then the hunters could seize the creature.<sup>42</sup> In an allegorical sense this tale symbolizes the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and the unicorn's capture is associated with the annunciation.<sup>43</sup> It is believed that this narrative would be illustrated in the tapestries that come between *The Start of the Hunt* and *The Unicorn in Captivity*. *The Unicorn in Captivity* shows the unicorn at the center enclosed in a circular fence chained to a pomegranate tree, symbolizing marriage and fertility. These symbolic images and the knotted monogram on the tree above the unicorn all coincide with the belief that these tapestries were created for a marriage.

The third piece of the unicorn tapestry mystery is *The Mystic Hunt of the Unicorn*. Only two fragments of the original tapestry remain today, and it, like the other unicorn tapestries are displayed at the Cloisters and are dated between 1495 and 1505 from Southern Netherlands. Displayed in the two fragments is a kneeling unicorn being bitten

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>42</sup> Genevieve Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry From the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century*, (Paris, 1978).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

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by two hounds, with a maiden standing next to the creature. The unicorn and the maiden, who is signaling to the hunter, are enclosed in a fence while just outside the fence the hunter is seen through the trees blowing his horn. Using the same mythology as the previous set, it can be deduced that the maiden is being used to entrap the creature. The hunter with the horn is thought to, like in *The Hunt of the Unicorn* set, be Gabriel.<sup>44</sup> Adolf Cavallo, author of *The Unicorn Tapestries*, explains in his chapter specific to these two fragments that there is evidence that this scene is meant to be an allegory for Christ, the Virgin Mary, as well as Adam and Eve. The presence of an apple tree is a prominent symbol for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The unicorn is kneeling while, barely visible in the fragment, a woman who could possibly be the Virgin Mary, is caressing the creature's neck. It is possible that the woman standing is Eve who signals to the hunter, Gabriel, as the Virgin Mary has subdued the unicorn.<sup>45</sup> Without the other pieces of this tapestry, nothing can even be concluded with certainty.

Between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe a major transition took place in tapestry art. It is clear when comparing a tapestry created in the 1400s to one from the 1500s. The illusion of reality has improved drastically, figures “appear to move in real space and create the illusion of depth.”<sup>46</sup> This may be due to the finer weave structure that began to be utilized at this time period; weavers began to use 8 to 12 warp yarns per centimeter as opposed to the 6 to 7 previously used.<sup>47</sup> The increased use of gold and silver threads gave an overall brighter luster to the tapestry as well as highlighting the

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<sup>44</sup> Adolf Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999). 47.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 45-51.

<sup>46</sup> Madeline Jarry, *World Tapestry: From its Origins to the Present* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1969) 142.

<sup>47</sup> Guy Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry: From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. (Belgium: Lannoo Publishers, 1999)



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lighter sections.<sup>48</sup> The use of frames, typically groupings of flowers and fruit, also began to be a more well established practice in tapestry.<sup>49</sup> The new addition of borders in tapestries was due to the desire of making tapestry art more closely an illusion of a painting. Tapestry began to focus more on well-arranged compositions, opposed to the cluttered and sometimes confusing placement of figures that was present in medieval tapestries.<sup>50</sup> These transitions were monumental and propelled tapestry art into a new level of fine art.

One of the greatest tapestry commissions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was *The Acts of the Apostles*, which was created to decorate the interior walls of the Sistine Chapel. The Renaissance painter Raphael designed the cartoons made for this tapestry set. *The Acts of the Apostles* was woven in Brussels by Pierre d'Allost for Pope Leo X.<sup>51</sup> This collection of ten tapestries shows an extreme development in tapestry aesthetic. *The Acts of the Apostles* begins a new age in tapestry art where artists took over creative control and the aim was to produce the nearest possible representation of a painting using weaving techniques. Tapestry began to be based more closely to the paintings of their time period. The cartoons, by Raphael, are now on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum, while the tapestry set is at the Vatican Museum in Rome. This collection began a movement where Renaissance painters became commissioned to design cartoons for tapestry. The line between painting and tapestry began to blur more closely together as Raphael and his followers continue to influence tapestry design.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Madeline Jarry, *World Tapestry: From its Origins to the Present* (New York: G.P.Putnam's Sons, 1969) 142.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 137.

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Then again in the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was another monumental shift in tapestry manufacturing. For the majority of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Flanders held the monopoly on the finest tapestry production, but with the success of *The Acts of the Apostles*, Brussels became the city to compete with and took over as the leader in tapestry commissions. Then under the new leadership in 1662 of Charles Lebrun, who was the court painter to Louis XIV, the Gobelins workshop in Paris gained status, heightening the prestige of all French tapestry workshops, Beauvais and Aubusson, and France as fine tapestry manufacture flourished. As artistic director at the Gobelins, Lebrun had over 800 weavers and artists working under his direction.<sup>52</sup> Lebrun utilized his skills as a painter and his experiences in Italy to achieve success. Under Lebrun's influence at the Gobelins factory cartoons were not as commonly supplied to the weavers, but instead paintings were given as the desired cartoons. This added some new challenges into the weaving process. Achieving multi-tonal areas and emphasis through shading is much easier to accomplish in painting opposed to tapestry, weavers used hatching to achieve the shades of the painting. The skilled weavers adopted new techniques such as; adding darker and thicker lines that were not in the painting to emphasis figures and exaggerating color transitions to emphasis overall effect.

The Gobelins manufactured tapestries exclusively for the king's own personal use and those to be given as diplomatic gifts.<sup>53</sup> Tapestry sets woven for royalty were particularly ornate and as time went on the themes of the tapestries began to become more and more self-absorbed. Lebrun was most famous for his historical pieces created to

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<sup>52</sup> Barty Phillips, *Tapestry*. (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1994) 76.

<sup>53</sup> Barty Phillips, *Tapestry*. (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1994), 77.

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“immortalize the splendour of his military achievements.”<sup>54</sup> One of Lebrun’s finest commissions was *The Story of the King*, this set was created to immortalize the reign of Louis XIV and is an example of the narcissistic themes that tapestries of this time period reflected.<sup>55</sup> This set of fourteen tapestries was commissioned between 1663 and 1673 for Louis XIV. *The Story of the King* series was created to illustrate the great exploits and successes of Louis XIV, The Sun King. Today this set is displayed at the Mobilier Nationale in Paris.

At this time there were also many tapestry manufactures creating tapestries for a more “popular” crowd, still the aristocratic and high class of Europe but not the kings and queens. For example, Louis XIV’s chief minister left the Gobelins to open a new manufactory at Beauvais, they worked off commissions from private customers rather than solely the royal family themselves.<sup>56</sup> A popular tapestry design during this time period, the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was *verdure* tapestries. Verdure tapestries are characterized by their use of plant forms, large leafy green sections, often in the background or foreground of the tapestry composition. Verdure tapestries were seen as popular tapestry’s and as inferior to the narrative panels of their time, because they were quicker to weave and the greenery often depicted hunting, which was a universal and common sport.<sup>57</sup> Although some tapestries did utilize the verdure design to encompass the entire background of the composition, the verdure style was also used in small sections of a tapestries background and was a popular method of achieving a forest scene. Believed to be woven at Beauvais

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Madeline Jarry, *World Tapestry: From it Origins to the Present* (New York: G.P.Putnam’s Sons, 1969), 185.

<sup>56</sup> Barty Phillips, *Tapestry*. (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1994), 77.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

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is the tapestry *Venus and Adonis*. This tapestry illustrates Venus and Adonis in the midst of a forest, which has been woven in the verdure style. This style was popularized in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and continued throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century tapestry art began to epitomize the rococo movement. Rococo was a stylistic period that can be characterized by a lightness and elegance; artists used pastel color palettes and the compositions are overall airy with an emphasis on floral patterns. This transition falls in step with the previous trends that tapestry art has followed. Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century tapestry began to become intertwined with the artistic and stylistic changes that were occurring in painting and design. A prime example of a rococo inspired tapestry would be *The Story of Don Quixote*, which was an excessively decorative and elaborate piece. It was originally created in 1714 and as it gained popularity multiple sets were woven until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The piece highlights the artistic elements of this stylistic period by utilizing light colors such as yellows and pale pinks. The center composition is decorated with ornate borders, which are then covered by flower arrangements on a damask wallpapered background.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the French Revolution had begun, commencing the downfall of the art of tapestry. The Revolution was a direct rejection of the privileged and luxurious lifestyles that had been carried out by French royalty in the previous centuries. Tapestry has always been a direct reflection of this exquisite lifestyle and because of this many tapestries, which were thought to be displaying anything less than public morality, were ordered to be destroyed. “As a result, hundreds of churches, palaces and castles were sacked, their tapestries vandalized and many hangings were set

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on fire to isolate and retrieve their gold and silver threads.”<sup>58</sup> Tapestry manufacturers not linked directly with the royal family were allowed to continue production; the Aubusson factory had always been the third best factory in Paris and never quite had the prestige that was associated with the Gobelins and Beauvais. The Aubusson factory was allowed stay open because of this. Then at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the invention of the water-powered jacquard loom, which made the weaving process mechanized and ten times faster than traditional hand weaving. The art of the craftsmanship that was previously revered was lost as the industrial revolution took off.

Today tapestry art is displayed in museums around the world where conservators are working daily to overcome the many challenges of preserving these enormous pieces of textile art. A few of the inherent challenges with these pieces are the fact that they are hundreds of years old and have already been put under a lot of strain from being hung vertically on a wall for years. Throughout the years, these pieces have also been improperly stored and handled. Their textile composition also makes them susceptible to degradation from light, heat, soil, and gravity. When meeting with Tess Fredrette, the textile conservator at The Isabella Gardner Stewart Museum in Boston, MA, I learned about the techniques that museum professionals are using today to preserve these pieces.

The weakest part of the tapestry will be the areas with extensive silk wefts. Silk degrades at a much faster rate than wool and because of this the areas of silk are considerably weaker. Other types of damage in a tapestry include; dye fading, distortion, soils and stains, broken warp yarns, missing wefts, holes, and weak slits. There are many different techniques that Tess implements to overcome these weak and degrading parts of

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

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the tapestries. Surface cleaning is done on a tapestry by vacuuming the piece with a low suction vacuum to remove soil particulates and lint. Wet cleaning is done to get a deeper clean throughout the piece. Solution baths were the older technique of wet cleaning used. The tapestry is placed in a water bath and a surfactant is added, after which the piece is blotted dry. This process takes between ten and fifteen hours. The newer technique being used by museums today is aerosol cleaning. This is when a tapestry is placed on a suction platform and an aerosol cleaning solution is pumped through the piece, suctioned through by the suction on the platform under the tapestry. This gives the piece an even deeper clean and only takes between four to six hours. Other types of stabilization techniques that museums use include closing slits, mending holes, reweaving sections, re-warping areas, as well as using underlays to increase support.

Another challenge associated with displaying these pieces is how to hang tapestry art on the wall without putting the piece under too much strain, therefore distorting it. The Isabella Gardner Stewart Museum uses either a strapping or full lining support system on each of their tapestry pieces. Strapping is when vertical attachments are placed along the backside of the piece to give the tapestry extra support. A full lining support system is when the entire back of the piece is lined with a fabric support. For both of these techniques an additional top border backing may be added to the top fourth of the piece. This is the section of the tapestry that is under the most constant strain. As for actually hanging these pieces The Isabella Gardner Stewart Museum uses a Velcro

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hanging system, which is an adjustable system that evenly distributes the weight of the fabric across the top edge of the tapestry.<sup>59</sup>

Tapestry art was initially developed as a basic technique of weaving in many areas around the world. Since its initial creation the tapestry weave began to flourish as an art form and in Medieval Europe was a “popular” and respected functional art form. As the trend of tapestry grew the art began to hold more and more prestige and was revered and collected by the aristocratic classes. During the Renaissance the art began to achieve the look of a woven painting and during the 18<sup>th</sup> century truly optimized the stylistic movement of the time period. The trend of tapestry finally declined at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the French Revolution and the invention of the jacquard loom. Since the new technology made weaving ten times faster the art of tapestry became less valuable. Today tapestry is on display in museums around the world where much is still being debated about the mysteries surrounding these enormous and magnificent pieces of art.

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<sup>59</sup> Fredrette, T. (2013, April 29). Personal Interview