

THE SHAPE OF THINGS

New Tapestries Not Painterly; Wools Used Are Carefully Dyed

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Hamlet's Elsinore castle had not been built for comfort. Its walls were stone, naked inside and out, pierced with open apertures through which raged the blasts of a North Sea winter. No glass made these openings what we call windows—and this was a king's palace.

The queen, seeking some small comfort, seeks to cut down on the gale-like drafts. Hence, in her castle chamber, which Shakespeare calls her "closet," those hangings named "Arras." As eavesdropping Polonius betrays his presence behind the queen's tapestries, young Hamlet lunges blindly at the hangings. Polonius, pierced by Hamlet's sword, dies between the "Arras" and the wall. This is a familiar, a famous scene.

It is Misunderstood
Frequently, it is misunderstood. We think of a tapestry, an Arras, as a wall hanging, quite obviously against the wall. But this will only happen in the palaces of later centuries succeeding those earlier stone castles.

In the seventeenth century, for example, tapestries will, in actual fact, become wall hangings, hung directly against the wall, as the curtains hung against the new wide windows, rich with new-fangled glass cut into window panes.

But not in Elsinore castle, nor in hundreds of other castles less famous but equally in need of the barest creature comforts. Here the tapestry was hung well away, 18 inches or more, from the clammy wall, down to the drafty, icy floor, providing some slight cushion of air for the unhappy nobles shivering behind their drawbridges, in crenellated grandeur.

Polonius Was No Fool
It was in this air space that Polonius went to his reward. He had not, as many readers think, attempted to get behind an Arras closely hugging the wall of the Queen's closet. After all, he was no fool even if his political maxims suffer from the folly of the politician.

The medieval tapestry was, thus, an expensive practicality, the product of a great craft reproducing the designs not of painters, as will happen only later, but of the designers of stained glass. In times when painting was found only in the miniatures of precious manuscripts on parchment or on small wood panels, monumental design could be hoped for only from those accustomed to the towering dimensions of the windows in great cathedrals.

It is from these hands that came the designs, the "cartoons," which the tapestry weavers of Arras or Tournai or Brussels interpreted freely in wool, silk and sometimes in gold and silver yarn.

Infrequent Fading
Because of this freedom, the medieval tapestry has come down to us with only infrequent fading or, where fading has taken place, a uniform degree of it from corner to corner, leaving the general decorative harmonies intact.

This happy stability could only last as long as the dyer and the weaver controlled their craft. But, shortly, the painter and the decorator will take over. Raphael was preparing a catastrophe.

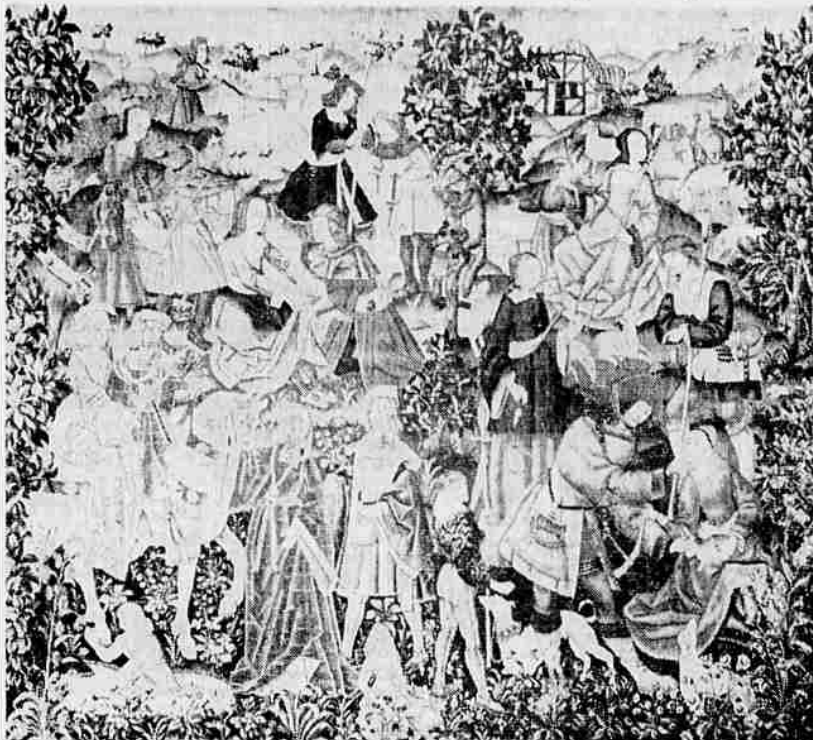
A poorly inspired Pope asked Raphael, around 1515, to design a series of cartoons for a set of tapestries to be called "The Acts of the Apostles." These were great frescoes or unusually large enamel paintings, were sent off to the tapestry weavers of Brussels on squares of paper which could be assembled according to their numbered keys.

The weavers were instructed to have their dyes match the shades and hues of each brushstroke. Nothing of the sort had ever been asked of these Flemish weavers who had been successful for centuries in the use of yarns dyed in only those several dozen colors, hues and shades which a patient craft had found to be light-fast and fade-proof.

Nevertheless, Raphael's tapestries were executed in the short space of four years. Hundreds of workers were set to this single task. The master weavers and dyers of Brussels devised for this purpose new and untested techniques.

When the great hangings arrived in Rome a new triumph added itself to Raphael's renown just before his untimely death. Response was rapturous on all sides. For tapestry weaving a revolution had occurred. In terms of craft, it was a disaster.

From here on in tapestries will be thought of as paintings translated into wool and silk.



WOVEN TAPESTRY — "The Welcome Guest," a tapestry woven at Tournai in Flanders in the late 15th century from a design by the unknown designer of stained glass windows in one of the great churches

of Paris. An example of perfect collaboration between craftsmen, designer, dyer and weaver, this great hanging, 11 by 13 feet in size, expresses a great and successful tradition. (Courtesy of Duveen Brothers, Inc.)

Under this perspective, robbing the craftsman of his freedom, his judgment, his command over quality and content, the dyer produced yarns which he knew could not remain color-fast while the weaver abdicated much of his creative role.

Rubens, living close to the weavers of Flanders, will continue the tradition started by Raphael, imposing on them

the exacting demand that they reproduce every blending of color from his brush. As a result, few are the Rubens tapestries today which have not faded and, worse luck, faded unevenly.

Here and there an ancient blue, dyed according to the medieval tradition, stands up against the centuries and sings out boldly. Surrounding it, however, are vast areas of

greying wool. These were once flesh tones, blended yellows, spring greens and hundreds of gradations which could not survive, tones which the medieval dyer and the weaver for whom he worked would have turned down as shoddy.

But not Rubens, nor yet the court painters of France who, later, were to be given control over the manufactories

set up by royal decree. For them the purpose of the towering tapestry looms could only be to produce decorative hangings from painterly designs. This will be done solely in painterly terms.

As might be expected, these once-luscious tapestries of the eighteenth century are, with few exceptions, but ghosts of their first state, while the medieval "Arras" of several centuries earlier are still alive with bold color, undimmed by age.

It was poetic justice that, in our century, it should be a group of painters who set themselves the task of reviving the lost traditions of medieval tapestry weaving as a craft.

People such as Jean Lurcat, Jean Picart Le Doux and a number of others have, in less than 20 years, taught the weavers of Aubusson the old principles of their craft which had been forgotten by generations of their forbears working in this old French town.

The result can now be seen in museums and galleries around this country. The new tapestries, which the designers call "murals in wool," are not painterly. This is due to the insistence of the painter-designer involved.

Rather, woven with wools carefully dyed in a bold, brilliant and carefully limited spectrum, they join up, by their craft, with the great traditions of the medieval centuries while, by their design, often whimsical and always decorative, they belong to today.

And tomorrow they will remain alive. (Copyright 1961, General Features Corp.)

Actor John Payne in Satisfactory Condition

New York — (UPI)—Movie and TV star John Payne was reported in satisfactory condition Friday but faces seven weeks in the hospital.

Payne, 48, was struck by an automobile Wednesday night as he was walking in the rain to a restaurant. Suffering from a fractured leg and several head and face cuts, he was reported in critical condition Thursday at Roosevelt Hospital, but improved quickly.

Boulder Lake Snow Less Than Normal

Yreka — Wilbur V. Howard, district ranger of the Callahan district Klamath National forest, has reported considerably less than normal snow in the Boulder Lake area.

Measurements taken March 1 by Howard and Glenn Fowler show that at Middle Boulder lake, with an elevation of 6,600 feet, the snow depth was 53.1 inches, compared to a normal of 66.1 inches. Water content was 24.1 inches, compared to a normal of 28 inches, Howard said.

At Lower Middle Boulder, 6,200 feet elevation, there were 44 inches of snow, compared to a normal of 68.7 inches. Water content was 17.9 inches, compared to a normal of 27.8 inches.

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