

A NEW ROOM FOR THE UNICORN TAPESTRIES

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The Hall of the Unicorn Tapestries at The Cloisters has been completely remodeled to provide for these aristocrats among tapestries a setting such as they might have had when they were designed and woven in the late Middle Ages for a Queen of France. The long, narrow museum gallery in which they were formerly shown has been transformed into a room of more gracious proportions, like a room in a French château. A monumental fifteenth-century mantelpiece from Alençon, installed in the center of the south wall, adds scale, dignity, and the texture of intricately carved, creamy white limestone. In the opposite wall a high, wide window from a late Gothic house in Cluny admits north light and a view of the garden of the Cuxa Cloister. The tapestries are hung around the room on all four sides, instead of along one wall in a continuous line. Now, on stepping into the room, one is encompassed by movement and brilliance and color. It is as if one were no longer admiring a garden from outside the garden gate, but actually walking among the flowers. The people of the Middle Ages would undoubtedly have preferred the tapestries this way.

In the countries of northern Europe, where winters were cold, medieval princes, dukes, and people of wealth literally clothed their rooms, as well as themselves, in warm, colorful, costly garments. Many a contemporary chronicler describes rooms entirely hung with tapestries. At the Peace Conference in Arras in 1435 “the Great Hall . . . was draped all around (*tout autour*) with tapestries made on a high-warp loom, on which were figured the Battle and Overthrow of the People of Liège.” At the marriage of Charles the Bold and Margaret of York in 1468 the banquet room was “hung above with draperies of wool, blue and white, and on the sides was tapestried with a rich tapestry

woven with the History of Jason . . . and the Golden Fleece.” For a solemn assembly in Brussels in 1469 the audience room of the ducal palace was “adorned and hung all around (*circompendue*) with a very rich tapestry of the great King Alexander, Hannibal, and other noble ancients.” Miniatures show that tapestries regularly reached from ceiling to floor; frequently they turned the corners of a room, and sometimes, though not always, they continued over windows and doors and even fireplaces—when there was no fire—to keep out the draughts (see ills. pp. 238, 239).

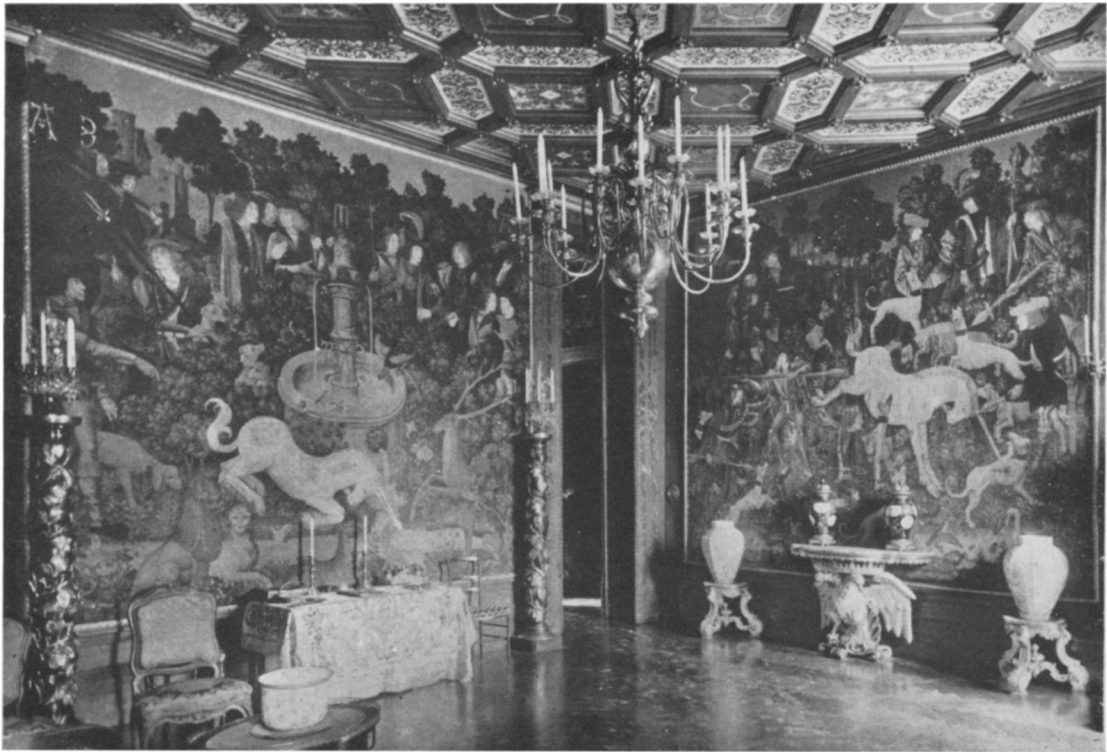
Inventories and expense accounts indicate that it was the fashion to furnish castle rooms with matching ensembles and even to name the rooms after the tapestries in them. One reads of the “Hall of the Nine Heroes” of King Charles V, the “Room of the Lions Rampant” belonging to the Queen, the “Chamber of the Swans” of the Dukes of Burgundy, and many another. Among the ensembles listed in the household accounts of Philip the Bold of Burgundy is “a chamber of white tapestry all woven with many likenesses taken from ‘The Romance of the Rose’, consisting of several pieces furnished with cords and tapes ready for hanging; that is to say, a bed cover, . . . a bed canopy (*ciel*), . . . cornice bands, . . . a dorser, . . . a tapestry (*tapis*) for the couch, . . . four large hangings for the walls, . . . a bench cover, . . . and twelve cushions, . . . totaling, in all, 374 aulnes [about 2040 square feet], . . . and three curtains [for the bed] of Arras silk checked in white and green. . . .” Another “rich chamber of the Duke’s, called the Room of the Little Children,” had “tapestries made on a high-warp loom of Arras thread, . . . a bed canopy, a dorser, and a bed cover, all scattered over with trees and plants and little children, and up above, on top, rosebushes with roses on a crimson ground.” Many such items as the following appear in the



*A tapestry in the Duke of Berry's dining hall. It rounds a corner, covers a door, and is turned under to fit over a fireplace. Miniature representing January in *Les Très Riches Heures*, 1412-1416*



An audience room hung with tapestries, and a tapestry covering a fireplace to keep out draughts. Miniatures from Froissart's Chronicle, about 1460-1480. British Museum (mss. Harley 4379, 4380)



The Unicorn tapestries in a salon of the Rochefoucauld château at Verteuil

inventory of Philip the Good of Burgundy: “A rich chamber of tapestries made on a high-warp loom with thread of Arras woven with gold, called the Chamber of the Coronation of Our Lady; consisting of a bed canopy, dorsi, bedspread, and six tapestries for hanging, two of which are made with gold and the other four without gold. . . .” The Unicorn tapestries form an ensemble of wall hangings such as the inventories list and describe. How they were intended to furnish a room can be better appreciated now that they are shown on all four walls.

In the Middle Ages, tapestries were presumably woven to the measurements of a given hall or bedchamber or chapel. But they were frequently moved about from place to place. When a duke changed his residence from one of his châteaux to another he often took his favorite tapestries with him; sometimes he lent them to a relative for a wedding feast, gave them as a bribe or ransom, or bequeathed them to a granddaughter. The tapestries were then ad-

justed as well as possible to the new surroundings. A miniature in *Les Très Riches Heures* shows that one of the Duke of Berry’s great tapestries, full of battle action, had to be doubled under to fit over the mantelpiece in the banquet hall (ill. p. 238). Moreover, his guests had to lift up the tapestry when they entered the room, for the hanging covered the doors.

Several accounts tell of huge tapestries being cut into smaller hangings. One tapestry worker on record made “twenty-two hangings out of five tapestries: King Arthur, the Queen of Flanders, the Mirrors of Rome, Doon de Mayence, and Judas Maccabeus. . . . He then enlarged each one by an Arras aulne [about twenty-seven inches] with foliage work similar to that originally in the tapestries,” doing it so well that “each tapestry seemed to have been made that way from the beginning.” In 1403 Colas d’Incy, *tapissier*, cut down three of the tapestries belonging to Philip the Bold, “which were too large to hang in many halls and chapels and



The Unicorn tapestries in the residence of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., about 1935

which could not be hung well or folded or shortened because of their great size and weight.” Since many of these early tapestries were seventy-five to ninety feet long and sixteen to eighteen feet high, one can well understand the advantage of dividing them into two or more pieces. About a century later, when the Unicorn tapestries were made, hangings for use in palaces and castles were generally ordered in smaller sizes, so that they could be more easily handled and more successfully hung. That the Unicorn tapestries have survived to be enjoyed today may be due to the fact that through the centuries their owners have found them not only beautiful but definitely usable.

How the Unicorn tapestries were arranged three centuries and more after they were woven is indicated in the inventory of the château of the Duke of La Rochefoucauld at Verteuil. The inventory, which is dated 1728, is the earliest record of the tapestries so far discovered. It states that five of the tapestries were hanging in

the “great chamber of the new wing” and that two of them were in storage in the large hall outside the chapel. Along with the tapestries in the “great chamber” was an elaborate bed of violet velvet embroidered in gold and silver, with curtains lined in green taffeta and “bouquets” of green and white feathers on the finials of the bedposts. The bed was valued at 550 livres and all seven tapestries at 195 livres. The inventory was made about the time when Gothic tapestries in general were out of style and many important hangings were serving as cloths to protect parquet floors while ceilings were being repainted or as wrappings around orange trees to keep them from the frost. During this period the Unicorn tapestries, at least, were used to decorate one of the best bedrooms of the château.

It was not change in taste, but the French Revolution, which brought about the only indignities these tapestries seem to have suffered. In 1793 they fell into the hands of the Com-

mune of Ruffec and, according to one account, were employed by peasants to cover their espalier trees, and to spread over potatoes in their barns, to keep them from freezing. Presumably it was at this time that the sky in several of the tapestries was crudely cut away, probably to eliminate the arms or other insignia of royalty.

A half century later they were recovered by the Countess of La Rochefoucauld for the château. In 1888 a visitor described them as a set of seven pieces; he noted the costumes and "naïve drawing which go back to the fifteenth century," admired their "incomparable freshness and grace," and regretted that there was a "lacuna" in one of the tapestries where "the daughter of the chatelain appears, doubtless to aid in the capture [of the Unicorn]." Fragments of this tapestry were saved by the Rochefoucauld family and made into portières and bed curtains. Happily, two of the pieces have survived and are at The Cloisters today. A later account of the set mentions only six hangings and states that the Departure for the Hunt was not with the rest, but outside in the corridor near the salon. How the tapestries appeared in the salon of Verteuil is shown in a series of photographs, unfortunately not dated. Here, in accordance with the style prevailing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were stretched tight on the walls and framed as if they were paintings (see ill. p. 240).

The Hunt of the Unicorn was given a more medieval setting by Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in their former residence on 54th Street in New York City (see ill. p. 241). The tapestries covered the walls from ceiling to floor; they turned the corners and continued across the doors in a very medieval manner. The room was almost completely clothed in tapestry.

In the new installation at The Cloisters, which was developed in close co-operation with Mr. Rockefeller, the tapestries, for obvious reasons, do not cover the mantelpiece, the window, or the doors. Neither do they hang by tapes and cords from iron hooks as in the Middle Ages. Nor are they lighted by flickering candles or flaming torches, the best illumination the fifteenth century had to offer. Instead, a completely modern system of electric lighting through louvres in the beamed wooden ceiling has been devised, providing for these treasures illumination more brilliant and safe than anything their original or subsequent owners could have dreamed possible.

The Unicorn tapestries have been shown in many different ways throughout the centuries. And each era has contributed a little something of its own to whatever room the tapestries have graced. There could be no better evidence than this of the undying vitality and the ageless appeal of The Hunt of the Unicorn.