

VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

EXHIBITION OF FRENCH TAPESTRIES
(March 29th-May 31st 1947)

Note: The Exhibition is arranged by the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Arts Council, with the co-operation of the French Government. Press View is from 10 to 6 on Friday, 28 March 1947. The opening will be by Mrs. Dalton, at 2.30 on that day.

This is the most important exhibition of tapestries ever to be shown in England. Here are brought together some of the most famous tapestries from all parts of France, and a survey of French Tapestry from the fourteenth century down to the present day (with the single exception of the uninspired 19th century) is displayed in a continuous series of rooms.

To appreciate the significance of this show one has to realise that the tapestries are drawn from Cathedrals, Churches, Alms-houses, Museums, Embassies and Public Buildings from all over France. It would take months of travelling to see them in the places where they belong. Moreover some are not ordinarily accessible to the public, and others can only be seen on special occasions or by special arrangement. For instance, the great Gobelins sets woven for Louis XIV (Room 9), are distributed throughout the Ministerial Buildings of France and French Embassies all over the world. Nor is it often possible to persuade Museums, Cathedrals, or Institutions to give up their works of priceless rarity to be sent to some distant exhibition. It is only in abnormal times such as these, after a World War, that exhibitions on such a scale and of this quality are possible. The war dispersed art treasures into places of hiding; buildings have been destroyed; Museums are not yet reassembled; hence the opportunity occurs, for which art lovers often have to wait a generation or more. It is here perhaps interesting to note that after the last war, in 1921, another very important exhibition of Anglo-French Textiles was held in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It covered a rather wider field, but as far as tapestries were concerned, with its fifty odd pieces, it cannot be compared with the present show. Not only are there 145 tapestries now assembled here, but they include perhaps the three most important sets in France, with several other sets as close runners-up in beauty and rarity.

These three sets are the "Apocalypse" Tapestries from Angers Cathedral, the "Lady of the Unicorn" set from the Cluny Museum, Paris, and the "Life of the Virgin" set from Reims Cathedral.

1375 The "Apocalypse" tapestries illustrating the Revelation of St. John were ordered by Louis of Anjou, brother of Charles V. of France, in 1475; the court painter Hennequin de Bruges prepared the cartoons or designs, basing them on illustrations in illuminated manuscripts (which still survive); Nicolas Bataille, head of a weaving establishment in Paris, proceeded to weave the six huge hangings, each containing fifteen scenes and measuring about 80 feet in length by 17 feet in height (see Plan in Room 1). They were probably finished by about 1400, and were given 75 years later to Angers Cathedral where they were hung as decorations three or four times a year, on Feast Days; neglected and sold early in the 19th century they were recovered and repaired by the Cathedral.

The "Lady of the Unicorn" tapestries are a set of six, whose beauty and lyrical quality have always captivated the imagination of connoisseurs and the public alike. Probably woven in the Loire district, their home was for long the Château de Boussac. Their subject is probably the five senses - Touch, Taste,

/Smell

Smell, Sight and Hearing, the sixth one with its inscription "A mon seul desir" being perhaps dedicated to the beautiful lady who, with her lion and unicorn, so dominates the scenes.

The "Life of the Virgin" set was specially woven between 1509-1530 for Reims Cathedral, which accounts for the vast size of the hangings, many of them measuring no less than 17-18 feet in height or breadth, as also for their large number; the set comprises seventeen pieces. No wonder that it is hardly ever possible to hang these as a set outside the Cathedral itself; the present assemblage may be regarded as unique in this respect.

Before mentioning a few other of the most important tapestries, a word about the old uses of tapestry, and then a word about the technique and the weaving of tapestry. In the Middle Ages, the great age for tapestry, its use was utilitarian as well as spectacular. In the cold, damp Castles and Halls of Northern Europe, a thick wool hanging for the walls was obviously a comfort; it kept out the draught and wind and if it was woven in colour, with figures, it also warmed the heart. But tapestry was not only found in the great hall or living room; it was also used to divide up rooms into compartments, for convenience and privacy. For this purpose a set of four or six tapestries would be woven; it was called a "room" or "chambre" of tapestry; it would be hung so as to form a room with walls of tapestry or "arras" (as it was so often called) within a room. (It was behind such a wall of arras that Polonius probably hid in "Hamlet"). A Duke or Baron would always travel with a few such sets in his baggage. But within this room he would also have another set for his bed, which would be curtained round and covered on top, all with tapestry (poorer people would use plain and cheaper cloth). Down in the great hall below the largest and most spectacular pieces would be hanging on the walls. Again the tapestry would be in sets of six or eight, perhaps even twelve pieces depicting the story of Alexander, the Trojan Wars, or Charlemagne and his knights. Nor was the Church behindhand in the use of tapestry. Special sets were woven depicting the life of Saints, Apostles, or the Revelation of St. John; these would be hung above the stalls in the choir, or even in the nave and transept on special occasions, the appropriate tapestry being taken out from store for this purpose. Not only the Church but the wealthy merchants enjoyed the use of fine tapestries for the decoration of their halls and dwellings.

In post-medieval times, the spectacular use of tapestry in Church and Palace remained as great as ever, though its other uses slowly declined. At the Field of the Cloth of Gold (1520) Henry VIII and Francis I vied with each other in displaying costly sets of tapestry, woven with silk and gold. Louis XIV created the renowned Gobelins factory so that his palaces should be richly hung. And particularly important was the display of tapestry at receptions, carnivals, feasts; for, unlike painting, tapestry is movable and can be easily transported and set in position where required.

Technically, there are two methods of weaving tapestry: the "high-warp" and the "low-warp" methods. In the "high-warp" method the loom stands upright, with the warp in a vertical position. The "low-warp" loom has the warp stretched horizontally. The former is the slower method, but it is slightly less "mechanical" and in practised hands it yields the most brilliant results. The latter is usually a cheaper form of production, but not always necessarily inferior to the other. Whichever method of weaving is used, a life-size cartoon (or drawing) has to be prepared from which the weavers work. Two or more weavers work at one loom, depending on the size of the tapestry. The time they take to complete a tapestry depends on its size and the fineness of the texture and difficulty of the design. One to two years might be a fair average for a good tapestry of the best periods. Once a tapestry or set has been woven, the cartoons may be used again. Repeat weaves, usually with minor modifications,

have usually been made of popular subjects, the number of fresh versions often being five or six, sometimes ten or more. Connoisseurs have to study carefully to which weaving a tapestry belongs, as this often plays a big part in its quality and value. The chief material used for tapestry is wool. Silk and gold and silver thread are often employed, in addition, in particularly rich and costly sets. Gold was very popular in tapestry in the Middle Ages, but the addition of silk in large quantities was more common in 17th and 18th century sets and particularly in the Gobelins weavings.

Let us now follow the exhibition round mentioning the most important tapestries, details of which will be found given in the Catalogue.

The first room contains the 14th century "Apocalypse". The second has Arras tapestries of the 15th century. Arras was such an important centre of tapestry weaving in the Middle Ages that it became a synonym for tapestry, and continued to be used as such as late as the time of Shakespeare. The "History of Clovis" - a typical large hanging for a hall - is of greatest importance here. Room 3 has the rose-ground tapestries made for the Almshouses at Beaune in about 1450, and the poetic "Winged Stag" hanging from Rouen. In Room 4 a long narrow tapestry recounts the Life of St. Stephen and was woven to hang above the Choir stalls in Auxerre Cathedral (presented in 1500).

Among French tapestries none are more lovely or more typically French than those from the Loire district, with figures on a ground sprinkled all over with flowers and plants - "mille-fleurs" grounds as they are called. Room 5 is devoted to these, and the "Vie Seigneuriale" (Noble life) set is famous among them. The next room (No. 6) brings us to the incomparable "Lady of the Unicorn" set; notice, besides the fineness of the design and weave, that these tapestries have a red ground in contrast to the commoner blue. The Reims "Life of the Virgin" hangs in Room 7. The symbolism contained in these tapestries has aroused much speculation.

With Room 8 we leave the Middle Ages for the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Tapestry weaving attained a high level of splendour and excellence in Paris in the 17th century as this room bears witness, although the weavers at this time came largely from the Netherlands. Passing through an ante-chamber, serving as a rest-room notice on the way the little tapestries woven from Raphael's famous cartoons of the Acts of the Apostles (the original cartoons are preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum); this miniature set once belonged to the Surintendant Fouquet, whom Louis XIV overthrew shortly after coming of age.

The Octagon Court, Room 9, contains seven of the most splendid Gobelins tapestries, woven under Charles Lebrun's direction for Louis XIV. Note particularly "Louis XIV visiting the Gobelins with Colbert" from the "History of the King" set, and (on the floor) the great Savonnerie carpet made for the Louvre during this period (1662, when the Gobelins factory was founded, to 1690, when Lebrun died). Room 10 has some beautiful 18th century Gobelins, particularly the "Hunts of Louis XV", and also a set of "Grotesques" woven at Beauvais.

The next three rooms, 11-14, are hung with modern tapestries. This revival dates from the 1930's. Mme. Cattoli then began weaving tapestries from modern designs by Picasso, Rouault, Dufy etc. on her looms at Aubusson. The painter Jean Lurçat then settled there and Room 12 is given up to tapestries woven from his designs. Then follow tapestries after Saint-Saens and Grémaire. Aubusson is the centre of this revival and most of the tapestries shown date from 1941-43. One set (Room 14), designed by Savin, was woven during the same years at the Gobelins.

Room 15 contains the technical section, with a high-warp loom from the Gobelins and a low-warp loom from Beauvais, both to be seen in action during the exhibition.

29/3/47

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"Times"

FRENCH TAPESTRIES IN LONDON

LOAN EXHIBITION FROM PARIS

A great part of the superlative collection of French tapestries exhibited in Paris in the summer of 1946 is now to be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

These works of art were hidden during the war and brought together after it, before they go back to their owners, so that there will never again be an opportunity to see together in one place so many incomparable masterpieces of tapestry. Before the Paris exhibition not very many had seen, and fewer still had seen in a good light, the great series of the fourteenth-century Apocalypse of Angers, of which a considerable number of scenes have been brought to London. It is easily the most important medieval tapestry in existence, a work which combines, in a manner peculiarly French, splendour of design with the utmost refinement of execution, and poetry with the most candid observation of nature. The early sixteenth-century series of the Lady with the Unicorn of the Cluny Museum is, of course, very well known, but it is very well hung and particularly easy to appreciate in the present exhibition; since tapestry depends so much on texture and colour this is probably why reproductions never give any real idea of the beauty of these works—it is most important to be able to see it in favourable conditions. Here again, and even more obviously than in the Angers tapestries, the poetry is most exquisitely distilled from an entirely frank approach to nature. Late though these works are, and already showing acquaintance with Renaissance forms, they are a consummation of the Gothic, and especially the French Gothic, artist's power of combining the most rarefied beauty, the most completely idealized scene, with an exact and almost scientific curiosity.

The tapestries of Chancellor Rolin, the "Cerfs-Volants" from Rouen, the long series of the Legend of St. Stephen from the Cluny Museum, the series of "La Vie Seigneuriale," also from the Cluny Museum, and the "Hercules" from the Gobelins Museum are among the medieval works, which, of course, are the most important part of the exhibition, collected here. The sixteenth century "Life of the Virgin," from the Cathedral Treasury at Rheims, is very splendid but rather disappointing and monotonous when thus dis-

"Telegraph"

SHOW OF FRENCH TAPESTRY

5 CENTURIES' ART

By T. W. EARP

Mrs. Dalton yesterday opened the exhibition of French tapestry at the Victoria and Albert Museum, to which public admission begins to-day. It has been arranged by the museum and the Arts Council, with the co-operation of the French Government, and contains the most notable exhibits of a show which attracted thousands of visitors in Paris.

The treasures composing this memorable display have been assembled in the exceptional circumstance of transit from war-storage to their homes in cathedrals and palaces throughout France. In their splendour of time-defying colour they illustrate over five centuries of their art's development.

The Angers series depicting the Apocalypse, completed about 1400, is, except for a few Germanic fragments, the world's oldest tapestry. The Legend of St. Stephen, from Beaune, is crowded with vivid portraiture and homely touches. But for beauty of design combined with enchantment of hue, the set known as "The Lady with the Unicorn," of about 1510, carries all before it.

The sequence of the life of the Virgin in 16 panels, from Rheims Cathedral, is the last great achievement in the Gothic tradition. After it a decline begins. Yet the achievements of the Gobelins factory, as in the baroque "Seasons," under Louis XIV. and the Louis XV. hunting-scenes, have something magnificent in their flamboyance.

Dope for
Mr. Shagg
we covering
next week,
probably
Tuesday.