



THE AUBUSSON LOOMS: WHERE AMERICAN TAPESTRIES ARE DESIGNED AND WOVEN BY AN AMERICAN ARTIST, ALBERT HERTER

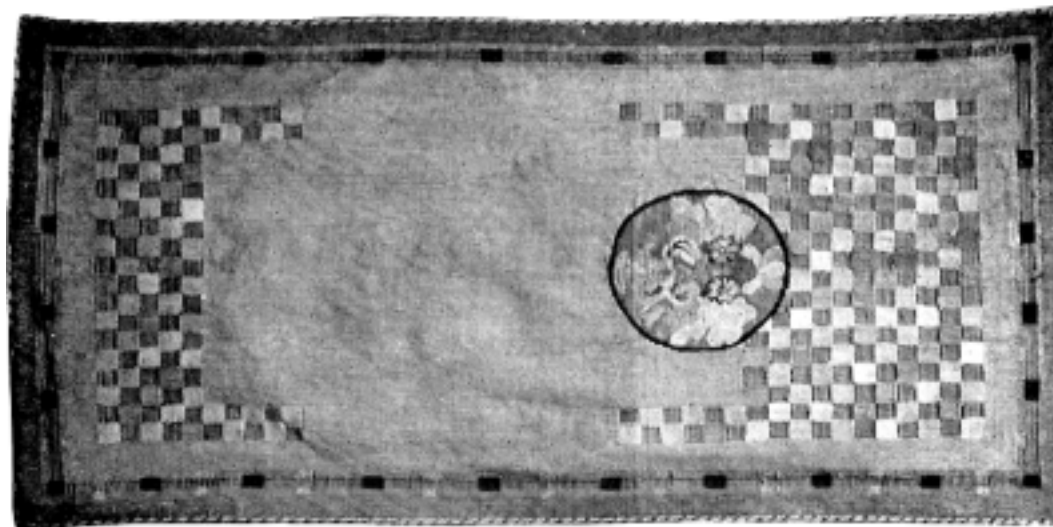
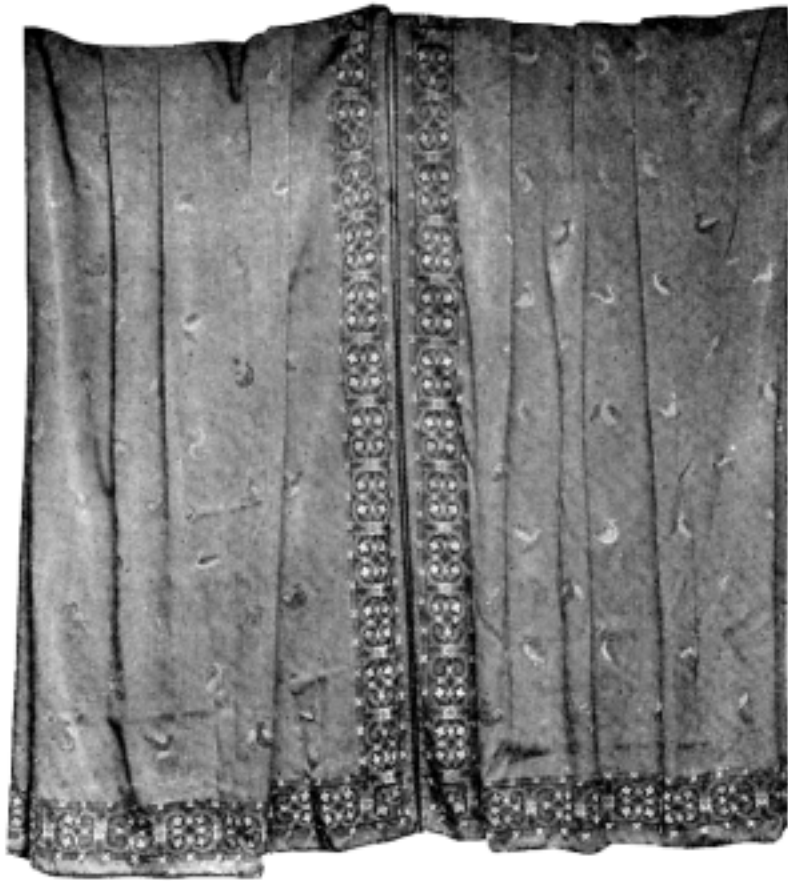
ROMANCE was the real thread with which the wonderful tapestries of the Renaissance were woven. To be sure, there were minstrels in those days to sing tales of honorable adventure to the hero of the feast, and troubadours to mention feats of daring in lingering cadences below casements half closed, and oratorical poets for continuous performances after tournaments and battles. But these musical and poetical presentations were but the masculine point of view toward the making of adventurous history. It was in the hand-wrought tapestries of Mediæval times that the gentler romances were told, woven in quaint grotesque expression by the women who saw life from castle windows or from the high set dais. In these faded sketches of Mediæval times one sees not merely the bold warrior who rode away to joyous deeds of pillage and high carnage; it is rather the lover, the valiant soul, the man who left warm kisses on weeping eyes, that the lady wove through the long spiritless days of loneliness in her high tower. If she were but young enough, she found threads of color sufficiently beautiful to portray the knight of her heart who went forth to right wrong, to help the weak, to battle bravely for the ribbon he wore, taken from her long braids. And so she wove from the design in her heart, and the tapestry which by and by was to hang on the castle wall shows her lord forth

as a true hero, and not the roisterer, the bloody chieftain, the cruel tyrant he had been painted and sung by the other men of strife. Or perhaps it is a boy who is the central figure of a more delicate tapestry, a boy clanking his sword gaily, singing exultingly of the fray, longing for that experience which he has never lived and which the weaver of tapestries has so dreaded. And we know from the beauty and the courage and the splendor of the lad that he is the first-born of the lady who wove him into her picture with sighs and memories of his cradle beauty and the fancy that the hand at the sword was still clinging to her neck with a little child's first heart-break.

For women who live far from other womenkind, who know men only as warriors or lovers, whose man-child is withdrawn as soon as he grows into gentle chivalry, women who may not toil for themselves or for others, such must express much of the inner sentiment of life in whatever medium is allowed their fancy. And so we turn to the old tapestries of those bygone days for the real stories of joy and sorrow, of tenderness and tragedy, which the women found in those times of great romance and, for them, great reticence and deprivation. And also in the tapestries we find all the sense of beauty that these isolated women gained from watching the stars on nights when sons or lovers did not come back;



A LOW WARP LOOM IN THE WORKROOM WHERE THE HERTER TAPESTRIES ARE WOVEN.



TWO CURTAINS OF INTERESTING THOUGH SIMPLE DESIGNS FROM THE AUBUSSON LOOMS: DESIGNS AND GORGEOUS COLOR SCHEMES ARE BY ALBERT HERTER.

LOOMS FOR AMERICAN TAPESTRIES

from the return of spring; from the rare sweetness of midsummer days in gardens behind wide moats; and, too, all they dared hope of true devotion, of faithfulness, was gathered up in the many-colored threads and held as a witness to their pride in the men of the castle and to their joy in adorning it. But it is not only the beauty of color and the most excellent craftsmanship of these old tapestries which stimulate our interest, there is also an intimate sense of a personal confidence received, and it is this which renders the imitation of such work a foolish travesty and an impertinence to art and sentiment.

And so as we move from one condition of civilization to another, we desire in the craftwork of each country and generation this same intimate expression of the individuality of the person and the nation; of the different life and the personality which grows out of the nation; and we are mainly interested in such expression as the record of the sentiment of the times. But to imitate merely the symbol of this sentiment is to lose its original value and to leave it a vacant spiritless thing.

Today here in America a few of us have at last grown to understand this truth, that the art of each day is but the adequate expression of the intimacies of a period, that to deserve a place in the art archives of the world we must portray our lives, our own sentiment about life in our handicrafts as well as in our more illusive arts. If we are to have American tapestries they must be woven out of American romance, the warp and woof must be the experience of the life we know, our own impressions of beauty in relation to this life. And there is more beauty at hand than the most ardent of us has ever dreamed of in this new country. It is blindness, not lack of beauty, that we have suffered from. To be sure, in a small way some of the American craftsmen have commenced to appreciate the value of this native beauty in the creation of distinctive expression in American crafts. Our pottery, some of our rugs, most of our stained glass work, are really beautiful

records of certain fundamentals of our civilization.

It has been difficult to establish a well regulated commercial basis for the presentation of our industrial work to the world, and yet this financial basis is absolutely necessary to the success of craftsmanship in this country, where the dilettante spirit in art is necessarily small. We may work behind a casement window if our taste so inclines us, but more often than not the product of our looms may not even decorate the low walls of our little castles; instead, our craftsman usually must spin that he and the landlord may not part company. Here in America we have developed an economic condition of self-supporting individuals. Little by little groups of these individuals here and there have grown to prefer to gain this support by a willingness and ability to do the beautiful things possible in this country for the people who would like to have them. And this necessitates a commercial basis for the success of industrial art conditions. A better thing for the country could scarcely be imagined than a proper standard for commercializing industrial art, making it sufficiently remunerative for people to do creative things beautifully and yet keeping the prices within such boundaries that the appreciative, who are not always the rich, may find it possible to have only articles which are interesting and beautiful in their homes.

Mainly here in America we prefer to imagine ourselves very elegant, we have a "personal aristocracy." (I believe this is the way we put it.) "Not mere titles, but something even a shade finer,"—if we were only quite frank about it. And many of us create a separate patent of nobility for our own interest according to our own individuality. We isolate ourselves by a proud scorn of work. However vague we may be about hereditary legislation, we have a phrase called "the real lady," which becomes the shibboleth of personal aristocracy. And our "real lady" never works. Here is where we establish the final last barrier and create our aris-

LOOMS FOR AMERICAN TAPESTRIES

tocracy of idleness; and very largely up to the present time this aristocracy has been somewhat scornful of the industrial arts. They seemed pretty common, derived from the word industry, compared with the more useless arts, and we didn't think very much about them except to classify them.

And so when a man like Albert Herter, a painter of achievement, suddenly without saying anything much about it, fills up a number of rooms with cotton and silk threads and dye pots and looms and starts in creating new designs for American tapestries, we are somewhat astonished. And those of us who do not think wonder why an artist should go in for the work of the artisan. And then we learn that Mr. Herter not only creates his own designs, but that he has no old-world methods, that his ideas are new, practical and beautiful, adapted to the more simple American way of living, worked out in colors which are suited to our own climate, to the woods with which we furnish our interiors, to our kind of beauty which springs from association with brilliant skies and gorgeous autumns and flaming midsummers, and we are surprised to hear that his textures are durable, of the kind which nice people crave where beauty is involved. And slowly we begin to forget our vulgar aristocratic pretensions and we wonder if there isn't somewhere a fine height of democratic level, a height of beauty and a wide level of interest in it.

We have a sentimental idea that Mr. Herter is doing in his own way what the tapestry weavers did in the old moated granges. And, as a matter of fact, Mr. Herter's first experiments with weaving were made because he could not find the sort of draperies with which he wished to furnish his own home. He wanted modern things for a modern house, not antique or imitation antique, or any crazy *Art Nouveau* designs, just beautiful materials in rich tones suited to the way he thought and lived. And he had to make them. There were none in America. He

could find beautiful stained glass windows, gorgeous as a New England autumn day, and pottery in the tones which suggest the soil which feeds the roots of our oak and maple, sumac and woodbine; and here and there he discovered a rug that was simple and in harmony with the ideal he had set himself, but no draperies, nothing for doorways or chair covering to be found anywhere in the country. And so from the richness of an imagination which has always been open to all the fresh beauty of his own land and with a practical American mind that would have only such measure of labor and expense as suited his purpose, he began making cartoons for his draperies; he dyed strands of cotton and silk, gathered together his gold threads, found a few French artisans who had seen hand looms before, and his new venture was under way.

The result is, so far as the writer knows, a totally new expression of beauty in industrial art for this country, and the product of the looms so far seems to be significant, vital and native. The Aubusson Looms, Mr. Herter calls his workshops, but sooner or later they are bound to be known as the Herter Looms; because the title he has given them means merely that he is using somewhat the same looms, the "low warp," which are characteristic of the manufactories at Aubusson. But the significant fact to the American people is that Mr. Herter *created* this industry, originating designs and overseeing their execution. Up to the present time the work of the "Herter looms" is most interestingly suggestive of characteristics which we have grown to definitely associate with the American idea. One might designate these draperies as informal in expression, for Mr. Herter has no restrictions as to materials or combinations of materials, as to colors or color combinations, so that the effect of the work is fearless, audacious—witness the splashes of gold and the startling accents of black. An immense variation of texture is acquired by dyeing a variety of threads with the same dye; smooth threads and rough threads, the

LOOMS FOR AMERICAN TAPESTRIES

finished silk and the raw silk in the same tone bring out the suggestion of variation in color. And then beside this, there is variation in the spinning of the threads and combinations of cotton with silk, or wool with linen, whatever suggests itself to Mr. Herter as significant in texture he does freely. He not only is familiar with the spinning of the threads, but he oversees all the dyeing, so that he has the opportunity of investigation and of seizing upon all the extraordinary beauty which is so often the result of accident, the unexpected development of the laboratory. Gold threads, bright or dull, he uses freely with cotton or silk, as the case may be. There are no traditions or formulas to hold back his hand; he permits himself a new sensation of beauty as often as possible. The simplest stuffs he delights to weave into tapestry with such gorgeousness of effect in color and texture that there is an association in the mind with the sort of outdoor beauty which here in America we have become accustomed to find stimulating.

It is really wonderful, the sheen, the sense of the vibration of light, which Mr. Herter has achieved in his textures, not by expense, but by experience, by understanding all the whimsical expression possible in his threads, his dyes and looms. And yet there is nothing whimsical in the execution. There is a sense of purpose in his designs and in his color; not the weaving of an endless chain of incidents, as was the habit of the Mediæval weavers, but with the definite intention of expressing in the form and in the color the purpose for which the tapestries are made; that is, modern American life with often great culture of mind and simplicity of daily life. The effect of the work is as far removed from crudeness as is the beauty of an opal matrix, or the subtle diffusion of color in a peacock feather, and yet there is always a suggestion of brilliancy, of vital lasting tone, something to remember, something stimulating, but well adjusted in spite of its insistence. In a single drapery you may find "sentences"

in rose bloom, repeated exclamation points of gold, vehement adjectives in black, and so the story is told.

And yet with all the originality shown in these new tapestries, I am sure Mr. Herter is not conscious of trying to create novelties or to originate an eccentricity which the public will recognize. He is not apparently endeavoring to impress his own personality upon his work and to create Herter tones or Herter designs. There is no overreaching either for audacity or morbid restraint, but a just appreciation of light and shadow. Having given up foreign traditions, Mr. Herter is not seeking to establish new ones for America.

The work of these looms is realistic in so much as it is fresh, spontaneous, a part of the beauty one feels akin to. It is impressionistic, as it suggests rather than instructs. It is so far away from the *Art Nouveau* twists and tangles and impotent involutions that it cannot fail to carry a blessing of sanity to the wholesome minded. A single curtain or rug never seems crowded or over-colored and you never have a sense of exhaustion from an apprehension of too much labor for a result. In scheme of execution the work rather recalls the methods of the Spanish painter, Sorolla, the seeing clearly and definitely what he wanted to do, and the achieving of it capably and swiftly.

The looms are at present running in a picturesque old studio just east of Fifth Avenue, and the workmen, in spite of the American quality of the product, are mainly Frenchmen (for in America as a rule our good craftsmen are all poor painters).

Mr. Herter has not given up his work as a painter of glorious color and rare decorative quality. His mornings are spent in his studio before his easel, but his afternoons are given over to the looms, examining threads, testing colors and following the weaving or designing patterns that will enable him to bring out of his looms such splendor of color and beauty of texture as only the craftsmen of the Orient, of old Japan or Mediæval Spain have ever dreamed of.