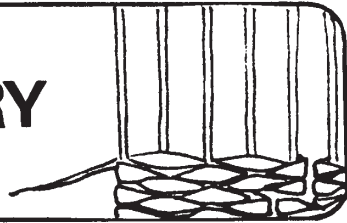


ON TAPESTRY



NOTES ON TAPESTRY MANUFACTURE

In previous articles we have discussed the themes depicted in tapestries and the manner in which they were displayed in the castles of Western Europe during the medieval, renaissance, and pre-industrial periods. I think, however, that we often forget to consider the complex interaction of various parts of society which is necessary to provide suitable conditions to create a finished tapestry.

First fibre is necessary to create thread or yarn. The majority of tapestries are made of wool and silk with selected use of metallic yarn. It was important that the fibre used be consistent throughout the tapestry, therefore, the spinners had not only to be efficient, but the art of sheep breeding had to be well developed. Fortunately, this area of animal husbandry had been studied for centuries and it seems that each country could fairly well supply their wool needs for tapestry production. Also by this time Italy had a thriving silk industry and later other European countries spent much effort in developing their own silk production.

Frequently the yarn was produced by spinners working in their own homes, although there are records which indicate that at times some of the spinning was done by the workshop apprentices.

After the yarn was completed it was taken to the dyers. Up until the beginning of the eighteenth century there were strict regulations regarding the use of dye material and the colors which were produced. These rules were necessary to insure the fastness of the hues and were related to the dye materials themselves as well as to the actual dying procedures. Larger tapestry workshops, such as Gobelins, had their own "in-house" dying facilities but smaller studios, such as

some of those at Aubusson, ordered specific colors from local dye houses.

With the appropriate materials at hand we can now consider the weaving workshop itself. Training was regulated by guild statutes. These were to vary somewhat according to historical period and location. Essentially they defined the time of apprenticeship as three to seven years. At first these positions were limited to children of master weavers, but near the end of the seventeenth century openings were available to any interested parties. The training could be simply working in the factory itself, were pupils were employed on tasks of varying degrees of difficulty as their skills developed. Or it could be a more formal education involving classes related to artistic as well as technical training. At the completion of this training and upon the production of a master piece of tapestry weaving, the apprentice was eligible to apply to the guild for a master status. Tapestries were produced on a contract basis, with the price structure related to the complexity of the design elements in the cartoon. The weavers themselves were paid on a task work basis. That is, the most experienced weavers wove the faces and flesh parts which required a higher degree of skill, and the less skilled weavers completed background areas at a lower rate of pay.

The finest tapestries were produced on a commission basis. First the cartoon was made and then it was taken to a workshop. Because cartoons themselves were so expensive they were frequently reused to produce several tapestries which were exactly the same or very similar; the main changes being seen in the use of different border designs. However, there is some indication that some workshops would produce a certain number of tapestries for direct sale to the lesser nobility or the wealthy merchants who desired to enjoy some of the same luxuries as royalty. Sometimes in order to make tapestries more affordable, designs were simplified and heavier threads were used in weaving. It is felt by some historians that many of the mille fleur tapestries were also a part of this trend of "ready made" tapestries.



Mille Fleur Tapestry
French, ca 1520
Gift of Mrs. C.J. Martin in memory
of Charles Jairus Martin
MIA 34.4

In the place of a one piece cartoon the head of a small tapestry studio could create his own by assembling the several design elements into one unit. The mille-fleurs tapestries made up of small animal and botanical elements were an ideal format for this type of production.

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