FIFTEENTH CENTURY WEAVE, FROM THE ROCCHI COLLECTION

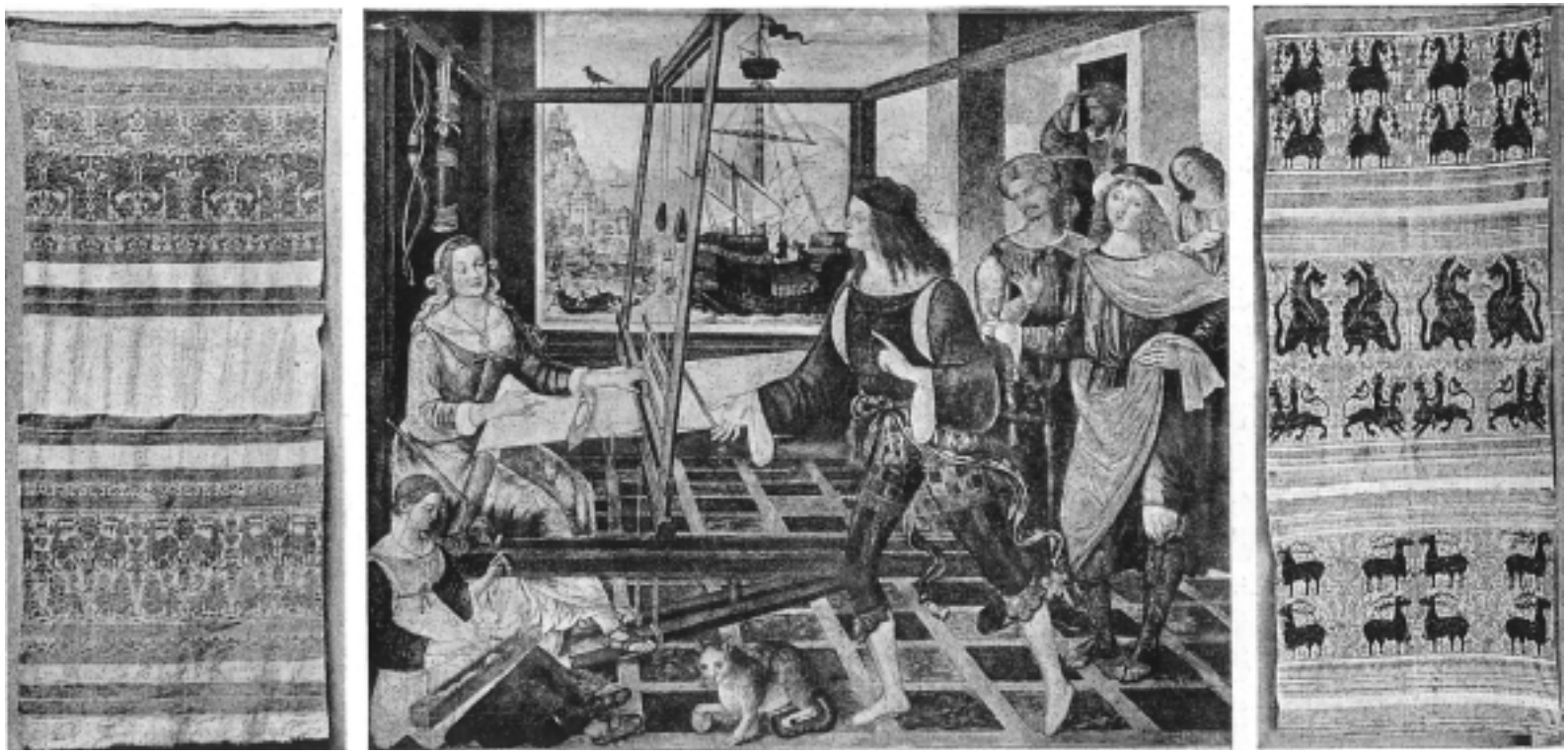
UMBRIAN WEAVES

BY FRANCES MORRIS

THE charming collection of Umbrian weaves lent by members and friends of the Club on the occasion of its annual meeting in February was an inspiration to all interested in hand-loom work.

These picturesque *tovaglie* preserved as treasured heirlooms in many Italian peasant families, make one realize the possibilities of the simple cottage loom; for here we have none of the intricate details of fine silken fabrics such as were produced in the Sicilian and north Italian cities in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but rather a coarse, loosely spun cotton thread woven in a simple diaper pattern with ornamental bands of bold grotesques in deep blue monochrome, of exquisite decorative quality.

The frequent recurrence of these weaves in the dated works of the Italian primitives proves that household furnishings of this type were in general use in Italy in the fourteenth century, although these earlier examples were devoid of decoration other than simple bands of solid color. In the fifteenth century, however, church inventories giving a detailed description of the patterns of the *guarnappes* for the altar, prove that they were also employed as altar cloths, cloths which may have been woven in



DETAIL FROM PINTURICCHIO'S "RETURN OF ULYSSES"

TWO FIFTEENTH CENTURY UMBRIAN WEAVES
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

the convent or in the palace; for at that time weaving was an household art favored by the nobility. Later, when rich embroidery in silk and gold became the vogue, loom-work was relegated to the peasant class, who, lacking originality, adhered strictly to old models and preserved to us the decorative features of the best period.

A clear idea of the household loom employed by women of the Italian Renaissance is shown in the charming detail from Pinturicchio's "Return of Ulysses," reproduced in the accompanying illustration. Here the artist not only has taken pains to record accurately the mechanism of a fifteenth century loom but has as well portrayed a delightful interior depicting Italian home life as it was lived in his day. The whole composition teems with interest; the naïve beauty of Penelope,—whose serenity is in no wise ruffled by the sudden appearance upon the scene of her ardent and impetuous suitor,—the demure little maid at her side patiently winding the bobbins, the complacent cat oblivious of the bird poised upon the framework of the open casement, all reflect the quiet domesticity of a household of the upper class.

The two towels illustrated from the collection in the Metropolitan Museum, represent the art at its most interesting period, for in these we find three motifs peculiar to the Umbrian fabric,—the Perugian griffin which appears in the arms of the city; the Guelph lion, the symbol of civic liberty; and the *fonte maggiore* designed by Arnolfo di Cambio and erected in the Corso in 1280; all motifs that appealed to the civic pride of the patient weaver who realized and availed himself of the inspiration of his local environment. Other popular motifs are the confronted stags, the fountain or castle with unicorns on the backs of which appear small skirted figures, or again the devil astride a dragon. In these two examples the fountain and castle are woven in a lighter shade of blue, and against this the dragons, stags and griffins are thrown up in the deep blue weft threads in striking contrast.

In all of these grotesques, more particularly the griffin and the dragon, one cannot but be impressed by their strong resemblance to the mediæval dinanderie figures which might almost have served as models; the loom work here reflecting the influence of the metal-workers, just as in England the *Opus Anglicum* reflected the patterns of the Gothic glass.

The decorative charm of these weaves is not alone in the beauty and

balance of the pattern, however, but as well in the splendid monochrome effects produced by the indigo dye which was first introduced into Sicily by the Jews in the thirteenth century and in time gained universal popularity in northern Europe. In this connection it is also interesting to note that the production of these Italian weaves coincides with the appearance of the blue and white porcelain in China, the earliest pieces of which date from the Ming Period (1368–1644).

This industry was revived some years ago through the efforts of the Contessa Gallenga Stuart, whose work was carried on at her death by the Marchesa Torelli Faina as a branch of the Industrie Femminile Italiane; the modern weaves, however, differ materially from the antique both in texture and color.

The weaves exhibited represented a variety of patterns, some of the early geometric type, others with reversed borders which it is claimed were suggested by the reflection of the figures in water, possibly the quiet pool of the *fonte maggiore,* and several similar to those shown in the illustration.

Those who contributed to the success of the exhibit were Miss Mason, who has a most interesting collection of these fabrics, Mrs. Kerrison, Miss Lois Scoville, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Sangiorgi Gallery and John Wanamaker.

Further notes on the subject of these weaves will be found in the following works: Gnoli, "L'Arte Umbria"; Belluchi, "L'Arte," Vol. VIII, 1905, p. 113; Bombe, "Rassegna d'Arte," Vol. XIV, 1914, p. 108; Vol. XV, 1915, p. 20.