



PLATE I

TAPESTRY. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK,
COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. GIFT
OF THE CHILDREN OF THE LATE OTTO H. KAHN, 1956.

A PORTUGUESE TAPESTRY?

by

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IN 1956 the Metropolitan Museum of Art received a tapestry (Plate I) as a gift from Lady Maud E. Marriott, Mrs. Margaret D. Ryan, Roger W. Kahn and Gilbert W. Kahn, the children of the late Otto H. Kahn. Nothing is known of the history of this tapestry and it has no marks of any kind to indicate its place of manufacture or its previous ownership.

Both the design and color scheme are unusual. The piece is 12 feet 9 inches long and 7 feet 10 inches wide, too large to be a table cover or the ceiling of a bed, and the scenes in the corner medallions are so placed that some of them are always upside-down if the tapestry is hung on a wall. Perhaps it was intended for use as a carpet. The ground is an agreeable and brilliant blue, with the design in soft shades of yellow, brown, pink, gray, and red. The hunting scene of the centre panel (Plate II) is, of course, a common enough subject in tapestries of all countries and periods, but this example has a curious exotic quality. The four small isolated medallions appear to show piles of treasure in landscapes, a motif as yet unexplained, but the eight scenes of the border are symbolic devices, all but one of which have been found in 18th century emblem books. The pelican feeding her young from her own breast (Plate III), the phoenix rising from the flames (Plate IV), and the eagle and her nestlings gazing with impunity at the sun (Plate V) are old legends, which, in the 18th century, can have secular as well as religious significance. A swan in the water can represent chastity (Plate VI); a fruit-tree, refreshment; and two palm trees separated by a river (Plate VII), the motto "Un même penchant nous unit." The bird either entering or leaving a cage can illustrate Petrarch's phrase "Perch'io stesso mi strinsi" (I put myself in bonds), or "Il ne retourne jamais"⁽¹⁾ (Plate VIII). The heart in a boat, tossed by the waves (Plate IX), has not been identified, but a heart hanging over smooth water can illustrate the motto, "It rejoices in calm weather,"⁽²⁾ and a ship in a stormy sea is a symbol of love in difficulties.⁽³⁾

It is not hard to date this tapestry. The almost frenzied irregularity of some of the *rocaille* borders shows that the designer knew that a fiat had gone out from Paris: there shall be no more symmetry. It is equally

clear that he was working in a far country; the subtle balance of sophisticated French rococo was quite beyond his skill. But where, in the mid-18th century, was the tapestry workshop that could turn out a piece so competent technically, but so naïve in design, and so original as to be, apparently, unique?

Portugal, which, from the unbelievable extravagancies of the Manueline period to the wild fancies of the embroideries of Goa, has so often given birth to the extraordinary in art, always comes to the mind of the puzzled art-historian. "Portuguese (?)" is a sure indication that the object so labelled is an unusual one. But the new tapestry at the Metropolitan Museum has some characteristics other than its strangeness that suggest a Portuguese origin. The roofs of the buildings in the central scene have the jaunty Chinese tilt to their eaves that is noticed by every visitor to Portugal and the landscape shows the palms and pines that mingle so pleasantly in that warm but wet climate. More important, there is a parallel in Portugal to the treatment of the *rocaille*; similar forms often frame the painted tile pictures, the *azulejos*, which exist in such quantity on so many 18th century buildings in Portugal.⁽⁴⁾ Such a light-hearted — or heavy-handed — manipulation of the rococo motif into shapes more reminiscent of *cervelles au beurre noir* than of sea-shells is not easily found elsewhere.

On the other hand, the extant tapestries known to have been made in Portugal are completely different. Rightly hung in a dark corner of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon is a piece marked with its place of origin, "Tavira," of about 1779; it is totally without originality, imagination or charm.⁽⁵⁾ Moreover, the manufactory responsible for this piece was not in existence before 1775, too late for it to have produced works in the full rococo style. There is shadowy evidence (lines in a funeral elegy and a Latin epigram) that the monarch of the first half of the 18th century, John V (1706-1750), probably the wealthiest ruler of his time, established a tapestry manufactory, but absolutely nothing is known of its products.⁽⁶⁾ Could they have been works of native vivacity and originality, rather than feeble imitations of the contemporary masterpieces of France or Flanders? Only if a tapestry with unmistakable marks should appear could such a supposition be confirmed. On the other hand, this brief description and the accompanying plates may lead to the identification of another tapestry of this type with a known provenance. Until this happy event occurs, the Kahn tapestry will probably remain tagged with the unsatisfactory label, "Portuguese (?), mid-eighteenth century."



PLATE II
DETAIL OF PLATE I. CENTER, SHOWING A HUNTING SCENE.



PLATE III
DETAIL OF PLATE I. THE PELICAN FEEDING HER YOUNG.



PLATE IV
DETAIL OF PLATE I. PHOENIX ON ITS PYRE.

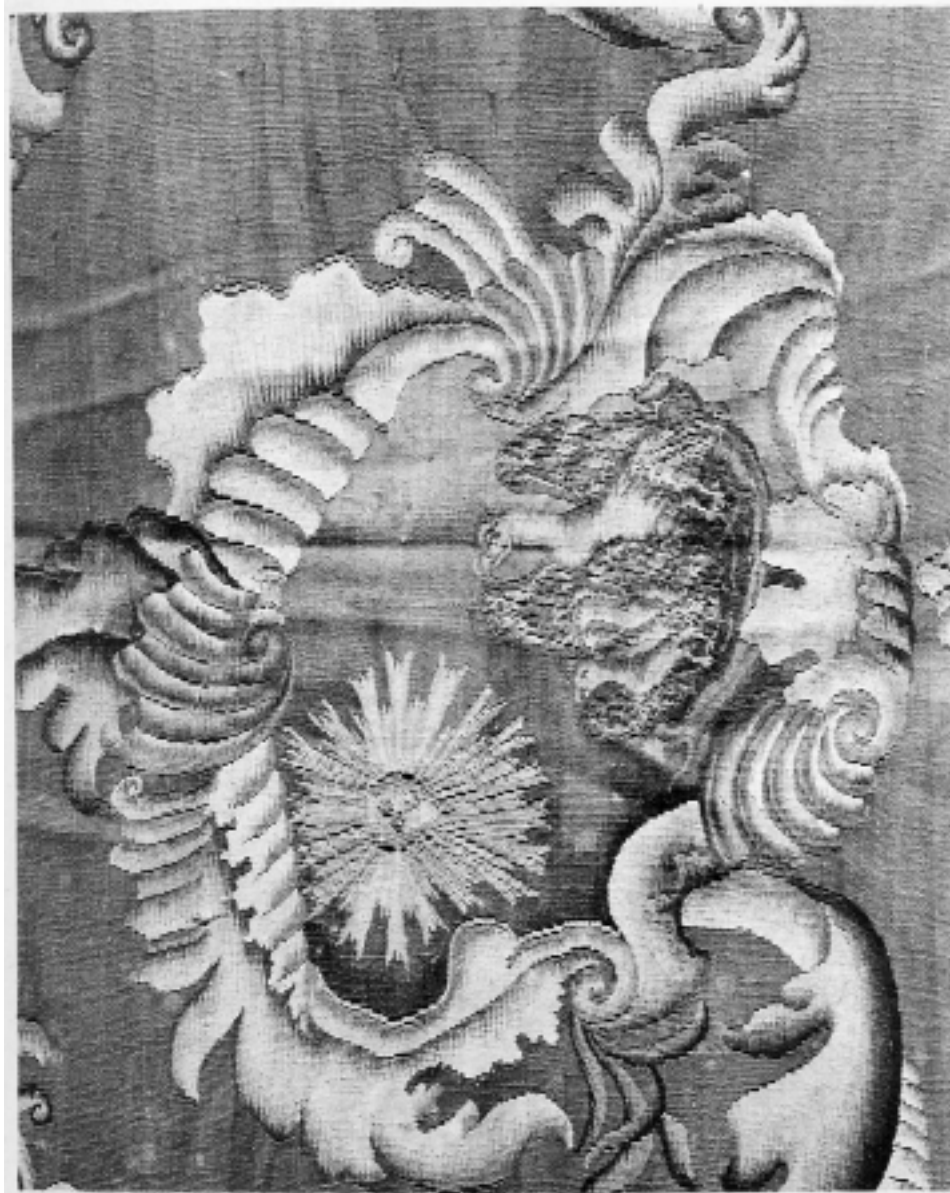


PLATE V
DETAIL OF PLATE I. EAGLE TEACHING ITS YOUNG TO LOOK AT THE SUN.



PLATE VI
DETAIL OF PLATE I. A SWAN IN THE WATER.

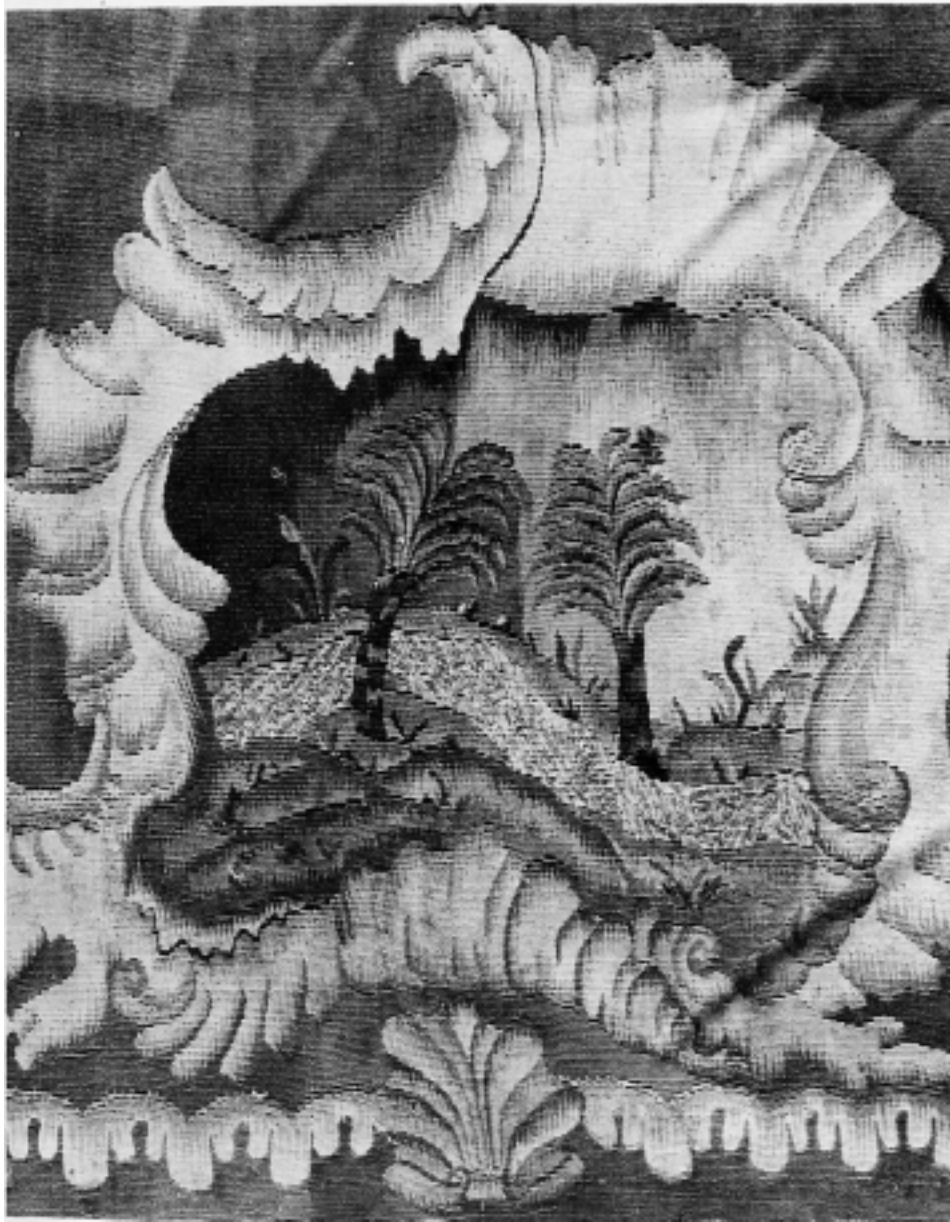


PLATE VII
DETAIL OF PLATE I. TWO PALM TREES SEPARATED BY A RIVER.



PLATE VIII

DETAIL OF PLATE I. THE BIRD EITHER ENTERING OR LEAVING THE CAGE.



PLATE IX
DETAIL OF PLATE I. HEART IN A BOAT ON A STORMY SEA.

NOTES

1. Illustrations of these emblems can be found in *Emblems for the Entertainment and Improvement of Youth*, London, R. Ware, n.d. (c. 1750); Woytt, L. W., *Emblematischer Parnassus*, Augsburg, Jeremias Wolff, 1727-1730.
2. *Emblems*, pl. XX, no. 9
3. Praz, Mario, *Studies in seventeenth-century imagery*, London, Warburg Institute, 1939, vol. 1, p. 104.
4. *Inventário artístico de Portugal*, Vol. 1, 1943, pls. CXIX, CLXIII, CLXXVII (table with similar *rocaille*); Vol. II, 1947, pl. CLXVII; Vol. V, 1955, pls. CLXXXIX, CXCIII, etc.
5. Göbel, Heinrich, *Wandteppiche, Die romanischer Länder*, Vol. II, pl. 527.
6. Sousa Viterbo, Francisco Marqués de, *Artes e artistas em Portugal*, Lisbon, 1920, p. 79.