

THE CONSTANT UNICORN

By LOIS CLARKE

THE unicorn is the doubtful beast that rarely appears to mankind, being the emblem of perfect good. In China he showed himself at the time of Confucius' birth, but not since, because people have become too degenerate. The Chinese call him the *ch'i-lin*, and he is the fourth member in their category of supernatural, or intellectual beasts. In the Bible he is mentioned clearly seven times as having great strength, moral as well as physical, though centuries later he was considered a small animal, surprisingly fierce and swift, gentle only with a maiden. This led to the unicorn becoming in Christian legend the symbol of purity.

Through these many centuries, in all forms of art, he has been depicted in many ways. He fascinates all and interests always the designer and the craftsman. To quote Rilke, "Because they loved it, a pure creature happened."

Among the oldest representations of the unicorn is the decoration on a gold vase found south of the Caspian Sea, dating from the first millennium B.C. Another is a painting on papyrus in the British Museum depicting the unicorn playing a game of draughts with a lion. The world of the arts is rich with unicorns, but here let us look at some textiles.

From the Chinese collections in the Metropolitan Museum two unicorn-like animals of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) are reproduced. One, probably a part of a border, is tapestry woven with silk and metal thread (*k'o-ssu*) (pl. I). The beast is tan with markings in dark blue, European in shape, but his single horn is set further back on his head and looks like an inverted question mark. The ground is cream colour and pale green, with blues and brown. The second, a rank badge with the *hsieh ch'ai*, the symbol of the censor, is embroidered on blue satin (pl. II). The body of this mythical creature is couched in gold thread; his crest, tail and teeth are worked in satin stitch with the five sacred colours—black, white, red, green, and yellow. Again the horn is set at a "foreign" angle to the western.

In the medieval Muslim art world the unicorn existed, and there are representations of this fantastic animal, very fantastic indeed. The ani-

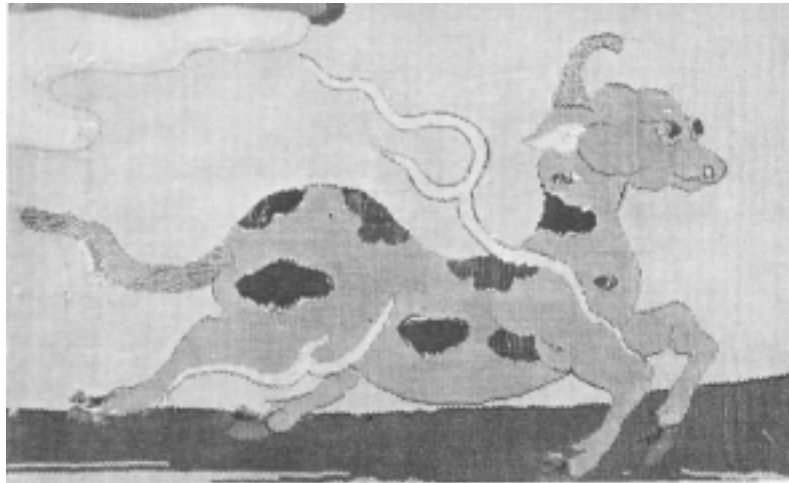


PLATE I

Top—Piece of border: tapestry woven (*k'o ssu*) in silk and metal thread. Chinese, Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Rogers Fund, 1932, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. $9\frac{1}{8}''$ x $12''$.

PLATE II

Bottom—Rank square: mythical beast, probably a *Hsieh ch'ai*, the emblem worn by a censor. Silk embroidered in silk and gold thread. Chinese, Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Fletcher Fund, 1936, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. $14\frac{1}{4}''$ x $15''$.

mal is single-horned, but sometimes has wings, often a clumsy body similar to the rhinosceros. In Mr. Richard Ettinghausen's study of the unicorn in Muslim iconography, two carpets are reproduced, a Mughal carpet in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., another in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, England. In both these carpets, the *karkadann*, as it is called in Islam, is an awkward beast not at all according to the western tradition. This animal is fierce and masterful, a warrior and fighter.

European examples are in contrast. A Scottish embroidered bed valance of the seventeenth century (pl. III) shows the unicorn at rest. This valance is worked in cross stitch on linen. It is from Judge Untermyer's collection and is now in the Metropolitan Museum.

A brocaded piece of satin from Portugal (pl. IV), woven in the eighteenth century with silk and metal thread, has a unicorn sitting at the feet of Apollo with a fine halo, surrounded by trees, flowers, birds and strange animals, even in Ethiopian having a boxing match with a lion.

Another brocaded silk in the Metropolitan Museum is Italian of the eighteenth century. It is of blue satin brocaded in silver. This unicorn is very lively and again surrounded by animals. Indeed, anyone going into the Metropolitan Museum can meet so many unicorns that he can say, as did Sebastian in *The Tempest*, "Now I will believe that there are Unicorns."

Plate V shows a sixteenth-century filet border with unicorns on either side of a fountain, perhaps guarding the water their horns have purified. According to Miss Edith Standen, this design appears in Vinciolo's pattern book, *Les Singuliers et Nouveaux Pourtraicts*, published in Paris in 1587.

In the Brooklyn Museum is a seventeenth-century English stump-work picture with a unicorn—perhaps an exception to prove the rule of his colouring, for this one is dark tan with a light-coloured mane.

Embroideries of Swiss work of the sixteenth century in the Schweizerisches Landesmuseum at Zurich show a unicorn in conventional European occupations, being hunted, chased, and with a maiden. The one shown in plate VI is silk embroidery on linen and measures 60 x 108 centimeters.

In the same museum are two early Swiss tapestries, one made in 1480, from Lachen. The scene shows the Virgin Mary in the "enclosed



PLATE III

Top—Detail of valance: unicorn, embroidered in wool and linen. Scottish, from Loudoun Castle, Galstron, Ayrshire, XVII century. Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1954, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 16" x 10'2".

PLATE IV

Bottom—Length of silk with mythological subjects brocaded in silk and silver thread. Portuguese(?), early XVIII century. Rogers Fund, 1952, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 33" x 14".

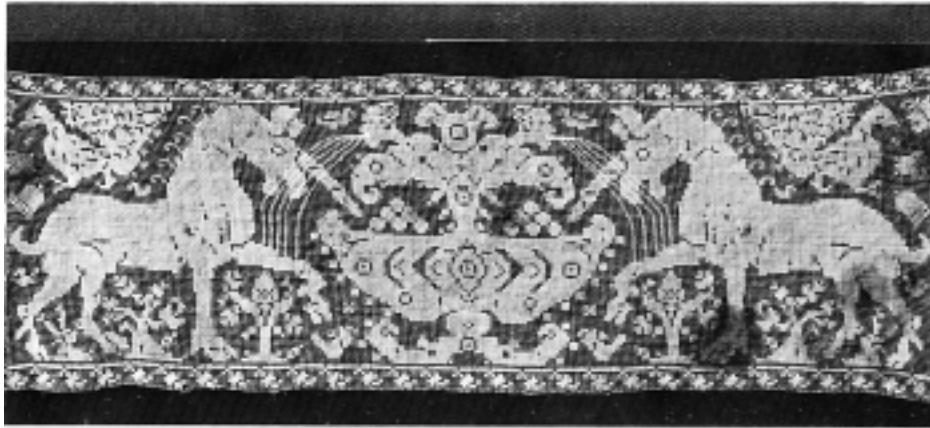


PLATE V

Top—Border: two unicorns at fountain. Filet worked in *punto a tela*. French, early XVI century. Anonymous gift, 1879, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 13½" x 31".

PLATE VI

Bottom—Panel: unicorn and maiden. Linen embroidered with silk. Swiss, XVI century. Schweizerisches Landesmuseum, Zürich. 23½" x 42½".



PLATE VII

Tapestry: The Virgin Mary with unicorn. Swiss, 1480. Heiligen-Kreuz-Kapelle, Lachen.

garden", the *Hortus Conclusus* (pl. VII), holding a unicorn by his horn while a youth stabs him in the breast. In the other tapestry, a small unicorn sits at a maiden's feet on the folds of her red gown, while three huntsmen with their dogs watch. Also in Zurich is an embroidered wall-hanging of a later date showing Mary in the *Hortus Conclusus* again with the unicorn being stabbed, here by Adam. This work is signed "Doratea Heidegger." According to record, her age was sixteen when in 1634 she embroidered this panel which measures 56 x 88 centimeters. There is much activity reproduced in this hanging, with many tales and legends, all clearly inscribed and explained. It is worked in many shades of wool, silk and metal threads on linen, in what in German is called *klosterstich*.

Two similar wall-hangings of woven materials are in the National Museum at Munich. They show subjects very popular during the Middle Ages in Europe—hunts and the eventual capture of the unicorn. This theme is shown in great detail and finely woven in the wonderful and familiar series of seven tapestries at The Cloisters in New York. The late James Rorimer wrote of these: "The profusion of details and the harmonious colours are masterfully arranged. The distribution of the reds, yellows, blues and orange, together with the emphasis on the white unicorn, is as dramatic as it is pleasant."

One of the rare medieval occasions where the unicorn plays an important role without being hunted is in the set of six tapestries in the Cluny Museum at Paris, known as *La Dame à la Licorne*. These are quiet, peaceful and static in comparison with the active hunting scenes. Five of these panels represent the senses, and the sixth, perhaps summing up the series, shows the unicorn with the lion, one on either side, holding open the pavilion-door behind the lady. Over the door of the pavilion is inscribed *A mon Seul Désire*. In each one the unicorn is important as a symbol as well as being a most handsome creature.

A reflection of today's continuing interest in the subject is a tapestry in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. J. E. Countryman, woven at Aubusson from a cartoon by Mark Adams, an American. This unicorn is couchant, but alert, ready to spring if surprised, and following tradition, has flowers at his feet, suggesting the millefleurs of the sixteenth century.

