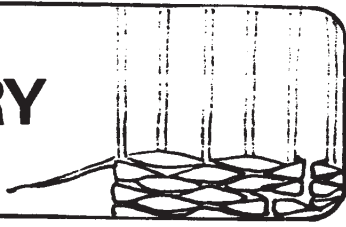


# ON TAPESTRY



Tapestries\* are frequently referred to as frescoes of the north where they served not only as wall decoration but also as insulation against the cold, damp climate. The tapestry form was especially well suited to this dual function as the nobility frequently traveled from castle to castle and took many of their belongings with them. Tapestries were relatively mobile and reasonably adaptable and thus could be used to great advantage in the life style of the Western European elite of the late middle ages and early renaissance periods.

It should be kept in mind that at this time the rooms in homes of the nobility were large and had stone walls. It took many tapestries to complete the decoration of just one room. Often tapestries were made in sets to fit a very specific living space but it was not mandatory that all the tapestries in the same room "match." Tapestries were very costly and as such were collected and displayed to demonstrate the wealth of the home. Establishments with large holdings would rotate the pieces hung according to the season, holiday celebration or personal whim.

The "decorative" function of tapestries initially had very didactic overtones. In general the subject matter of the first tapestries was religious. The biblical scenes or lives of saints depicted were meant to inspire the viewer to holy thoughts and virtuous aspirations. In time historical themes became more popular, but the educational intent continued. Patrons of the arts (who were frequently the ruling gentry) and their families, were often depicted as heroic figures from history and as such, in the eyes of the viewer assumed the virtues of the characters they portrayed.

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts has ten pieces from a very famous set of early seventeenth century French tapestries. The tale they tell is of the fourth century B.C. widowed Halicarnassian Queen,

Artemisia. The story as written by the sixteenth century poet Houel was divided into three parts. First the bereaved queen is seen involved with the elaborate funeral arrangements for her dead husband Mausolus. The second part of the story concentrates on Artemesia's duties as Regent for her son Lygdamis and the importance of his education. The last section describes the cares of state that must be attended to in order to maintain the kingdom until the young king reaches his majority.

Houel was a member of Catherine di Medici's court and wrote his poem after the death of her husband Henry II and while she was regent for her son Charles IX. By comparing Catherine's situation to the heroic queen Artemesia, Houel hoped to win royal favor. He not only composed the poem, but indicated how easily the story could be made more popular through the creation of a series of tapestries, which would be a further testimony to Catherine's greatness.

As originally conceived the Artemesia set was to contain 74 tapestries, however, many of the original designs were never woven. As fate would have it, the Artemesia theme was popular for many years as two other French queens, Marie de Medici and Ann of Austria at the death of their husbands became regents for their sons. Both of these queens had tapestries woven from the existing cartoons, but added newly designed borders which included their coat of arms.

Despite the fact that numerous sets of the Artemesia series were woven, at the present time only twenty-eight tapestries remain and none of these bear Catherine de Medici's cypher. The largest group of these survivors are now a part of The Minneapolis Institute of Arts' collection. Eight were woven in 1610 and bear the monogram of Louis XIII (Marie de Medici's son) in the borders and two other tapestries were woven for Ann of Austria in 1615.

For the first time in years many of these tapestries are now on display at the museum in conjunction with the tapestry conservation exhibition A LOOK BEHIND CLOSED DOORS. Guild members and other interested individuals are encouraged to visit the Institute and learn more about the individual tapestries in this series.



The tapestry illustrated (MIA 48.13.1) was woven in 1610 for Marie de Medici under the direction of master weavers Philippe Maecht and Adriaen de Welde. It is one of a series from the first part of Artemisia/Catherine de Medici's history depicting the funeral of Mausolus/Henri II. Here can be seen three philosophers standing at the

entrance of a garden watching the procession, which is not visible in this tapestry. It is interesting to note that the background of these Halicarnassian figures includes wings of a palace reminiscent of Fontainebleau. The border designs include the coats of arms of France (lilies) and Navarre (crossed chains) as well as the initial "L" for Louis XIII.

\*Throughout this article the word "tapestry" is used to refer to the large pictorial wall hangings developed in medieval Western Europe utilizing a "tapestry"

woven structure on a plain weave base. Tapestry weaving, i.e., the structure, of course is not limited to this particular format.