

THE MOON AND HER CHILDREN A TAPESTRY FROM A SET OF THE PLANETS

By

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Our ancestors thousands of years ago became aware of seven heavenly bodies that did not make their daily circuit of the earth in fixed positions relative to the others, but, in the course of the year, wandered about the sky. Five of these we still call "planets," a name derived from the Greek word meaning "wanderer," but the two brightest, the sun and the moon, we now know to be very different from the rest. Each of the seven was thought to determine the fate of men and women, its "children," born when it rose; in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a number of prints were made in Germany and Italy of the planets and their children, the latter engaged in the occupations to which the hour of their birth had predisposed them. One of these was used by the designer of a sixteenth-century tapestry in the Metropolitan Museum (Plates I, II).

The planet rides in her chariot among the clouds in both woodcut and tapestry. She holds a crescent moon and a horn and represents Luna. The chariot has a single pair of wheels and on the visible one appears the sign of the zodiac associated with the moon, Cancer, shown as a crayfish. As there are twelve signs and only seven planets, every planet except the sun and the moon was thought to rule two signs each; these were known as their "houses." The moon's chariot is drawn by two girls;¹ as Luna was identified with Diana, these are presumably two of the nymphs of the goddess. That one turns her back and one is seen full-face may be a reference to the phases of the moon.

Each planet was also believed to be linked with one of the four elements and, because it causes the tides, the moon's element was water; in the second century A.D., Ptolemy wrote in his astrological treatise, the *Tetrabiblos*, that "the seas turn their own tides with her rising and setting" and Shakespeare has Falstaff speak of "being governed as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon." A river landscape thus constitutes most of the principal scene in the print and the tapestry, for the children of the moon often have watery activities; they are here found fishing by different methods and traveling in boats. On the right is a water-mill with a laden mule approaching it. A more unusual activity is under way on the far bank of the river. Two men in the tapestry, three in the woodcut, stand by a round table; one is in swimming trunks and two

hold oars. On the table are a cup and some small round objects; a gesticulating man sits on the other side. The building behind him is an inn, with several platters hanging from a protruding pole. What is going on is a shell-game;² since the moon is continually changing shape, among her children are all vagrants and unreliable people, such as voyagers, conjurers and charlatans.³

The tapestry, with eight others, was bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum in 1915 by Mrs. Robert McMaster Gillespie. It was published in the museum *Bulletin* of the same year as the *Month of June*, a title suggested by the sign of the zodiac for this month on the chariot wheel. Unfortunately, much of the lower border is a replacement, so that the central medallion now contains only a fragment of what was certainly once an inscription, "LVNA;" another tapestry from the same set sold at the Hôtel Drouot, Paris, December 15, 1913, no. 108, shows a scene of war and has "MARS" in its similarly-placed medallion. Its composition is derived from the *Mars* of the same set of woodcuts as the *Luna*. These are dated 1531 and are attributed to Bartel Beham (1502-1540).⁴ Tapestries of the children of Mercury and the Sun with compositions adapted from the Beham woodcuts were sold at the Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, December 10, 1926, nos. 139, 140, but their borders, though similar, are not the same as those of *Luna* and *Mars*, so they must belong to another set; one is dated 1547. A complete set of small tapestries, dated 1549, more closely copied from the prints, was in the Baronne B. sale at the Galerie Charpentier, Paris, December 2, 1958, no. 133; these have verses in German at the top of each piece and are not stylistically related to the *Luna* and *Mars*.

The style of the tapestry in the Metropolitan Museum is, in fact, puzzling. The German original has been much altered in its translation into wool. This is due in part to the change from an upright to a horizontal format, which may also be the reason for several added figures. The greater profusion of plants and flowers, even the meaningless parrot with its nest in the center, can be justified by the need for increased richness and variety in tapestry design; blank spaces quickly become mere expanses of cloth. But much more conspicuous is the replacement of the stocky, stolid and forceful German figures by the elongated, elegant and somewhat languid men and boys of the tapestry. The difference is particularly marked in the two clothed figures at either side, the boy wielding a pole with a net at the end and the boy fishing with a rod and line; in the woodcut they wear somewhat shapeless but quite possible peasant clothes, whereas in the tapestry their would-be gracefully draped garments flutter and fly out in a utterly unrealistic manner. The boy with the pole, his robe hitched

up over his hips and tied at each shoulder, looks like a crude effort to depict a classical nymph. The lackadaisical figure in the rowboat is also very far from his strenuous, muscular prototype.

The tapestry has no marks of origin. The border is typically Flemish, but the central scene is not; it is strikingly different from a Brussels version of the subject in the Bavarian National Museum, Munich (Plate III).⁵ Here, though an attempt has been made to give the women fashionably Manneristic proportions and flowing draperies, the figures on the whole are naturalistic and down to earth. A French origin has been suggested for the design and perhaps the manufacture of the Metropolitan Museum tapestry,⁶ but, if so, the artist and weavers must have been far indeed from Paris and Fontainebleau. The naive charm of the piece, its crude draughtsmanship and the rather coarse weave (5-6 warps per centimeter) suggest a provincial workshop, but whether in France or in Flanders cannot be stated with any certainty.

NOTES

1. The group is also found on a fifteenth-century Florentine print, the ceiling by Perugino and assistants of the Udienza del Cambio, Perugia, a sixteen-century enamel in the Jacquemart-André Museum, Paris, and elsewhere. It has been said to be derived from a classical gem (F. Saxl, "The literary sources of the 'Finiguerra Planets,'" *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, vol. 2, 1938-9, p. 73). But according to Guy de Tervarent the chariot drawn by nymphs is a Renaissance invention (*Attributs et Symboles dans l'Art Profane, 1450-1600*, Geneva, 1958, vol. 1, s.v. "Char trainé par deux femmes").
2. It is the foreground scene in the German fifteenth-century drawing in the Wolfegg *Housebook* that shows the children of the moon (L. Brand Philip, "The Peddler by Hieronymus Bosch," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, vol. 9, 1958, fig. 18).
3. The fullest list of the occupations and characteristics of the children of the moon is given in Anna Boczkowska, "The Lunar symbolism of the Ship of Fools by Hieronymus Bosch," *Oud Holland*, vol. 86, 1971, pp. 47-69. See also Heinz Arthur Strauss, "Zur Sinndeutung der Planetenbilder," *Munchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, n.s. vol. 2, 1925, p. 54.
4. A complete set is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Anna C. Hoyt, "The woodcuts of the Planets formerly attributed to Hans Sebald Beham," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, vol. 52, 1954, pp. 1-10).
5. The *Mercury* of this set of seven pieces was published in Roger A. D'Hulst, *Flemish Tapestries*, New York, 1967, pp. 245-250. Other Flemish sets are in the Château de Chaumont-sur-loire (*Mercury* exhibited in Paris, 1965-1966, *Le XVI^e Siècle Européen, Tapisseries*, catalogue no. 33) and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (acc. no. T.169-1931). An early seventeenth-century tapestry of the moon as a single seated figure is in the Cincinnati Art Museum (Walter A. Siple, "A tapestry representing the Planet Luna," *Bulletin of the Cincinnati Art Museum*, vol. 5, no. 2, April 1934, pp. 46-58).
6. By Adolph S. Cavallo in a private communication.

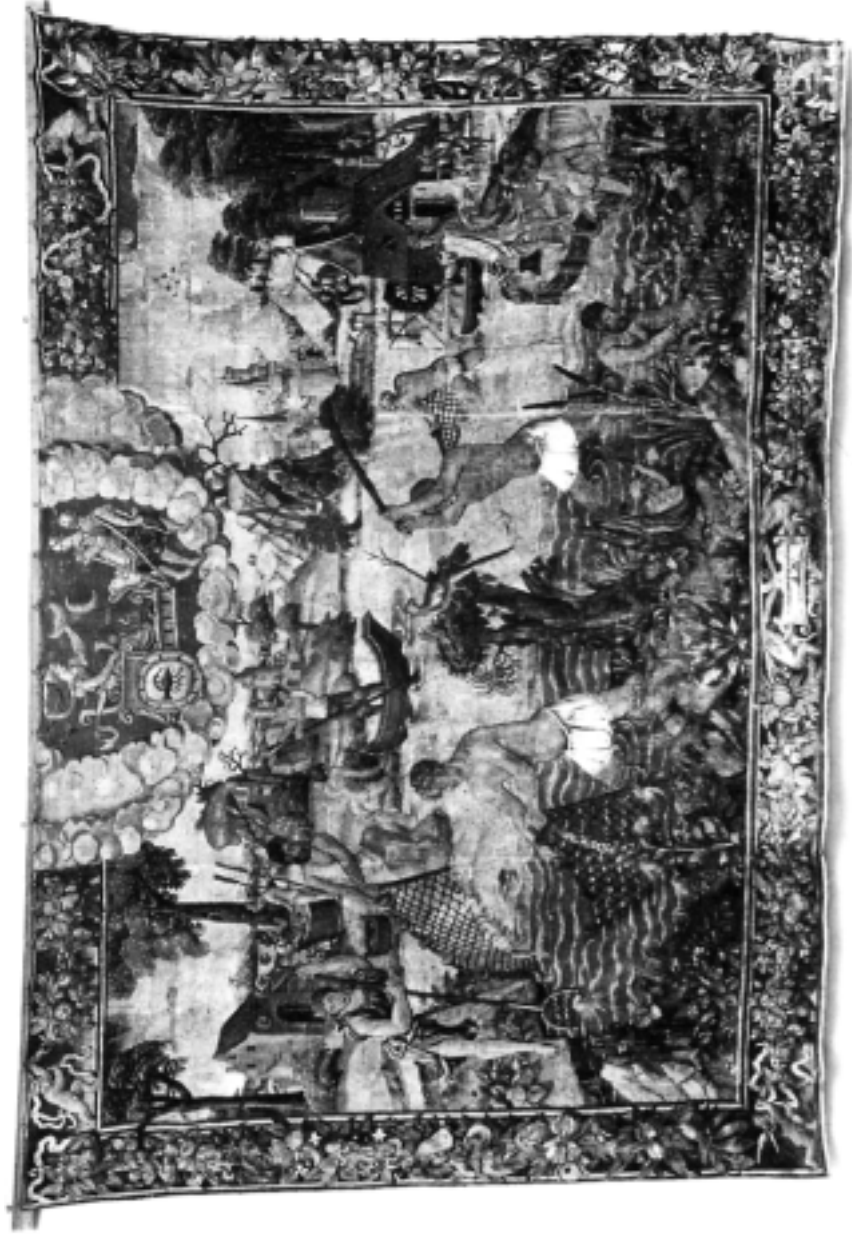


Plate I
The Moon and her Children. Tapestry, Flemish or French, second half of the XVI century. Bequest of Mrs. Robert McMaster Gillespie, 1915, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Plate II The Moon and her Children. Woodcut by Bartel Beham, 1531.
From a Facsimile.



Plate III The Moon and her Children. Tapestry, Flemish, mid XVI century. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum Munich.