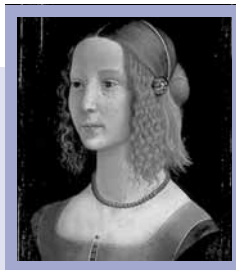


The Lady and the Unicorn



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Promotions and Publications

The lady and the unicorn tapestry cycle of six panels is displayed in a specially-constructed semi-circular room in the Musée du Moyen Age or Cluny Museum in Paris. The tapestries were probably designed in Paris and made in Flanders at the end of the fifteenth century. From the late fourteenth century series of tapestry panels were an important form of large-scale pictorial wall coverings throughout Europe.

The imposing size of the tapestries 3,5m x 3,5m, makes this work of art imposing and appealing. The tapestries were woven with silk and wool threads, with more than five warp threads per centimetre. The lack of archives of the era has resulted in several mysteries surrounding the origin and interpretation of this intricate work of art.

History

The identity of who commissioned the tapestries is one of these mysteries. While the coat of arms featured on each of the tapestries is that of the Le Vistes, a bourgeoisie family of wealthy lawyers from Lyon who became members of the French court by virtue of their wealth, it has never been resolved which Le Viste they refer to. Most historians believe it to be Jean IV, a president of the Cour de Aides and renowned art

patron who died in 1500, although others suggest it was Jean IV's cousin Aubert (advisor to the Parliament) or Aubert's son, Antoine, who was president of the Parliament in 1523.

Further advancing the Le Viste connection to the tapestries is the unicorn depicted in them. In old French *viste* means fast and the unicorn is recognised as a symbol of speed.

The tapestries were found in the Château de Boussac, in central France. The municipality of Boussac bought the château and all it contained in 1837 for about £1 000. In 1882, the French Government, who, for the same sum, acquired them from the municipal authorities of Boussac, presented the tapestries to the Cluny Museum.

Six panels

The subject of each panel is a lady in rich costume and jewels, who stands on a blue island of grass, surrounded by rose-coloured ground covered with flowers, among which various animals play. The elegantly-dressed lady and her maid are engaged in courtly pastimes that also refer to the five senses. In the majority of the panels a lion and a unicorn are supporting standards with the arms of the family of Le Viste with its three crescent moons. The background is covered with small-scale floral motif (*millefleurs* or 'thousand flowers') that was popular in the fifteenth century and also used on smaller

pieces of furniture covers and decoration. Captivating detail can be found on closer perusal, such as rabbits and other animals while a monkey echoes the lady's actions.

Five panels depict an allegory of the senses:

Taste

The Lady takes a confectionery from a golden dish offered to her by her maidservant. The taste is also represented by the monkey at her feet, which brings a confectionery to its mouth.

Smell

The Lady weaves a wreath of flowers while the monkey sniffs one.

Hearing

The Lady plays a small organ while the maidservant actuates the bellows.

Touch

The Lady delicately strokes the unicorn's horn with her left hand.

Sight

The unicorn is resting his forelegs on the Lady's knee and looks at its reflection in a mirror she is holding.

Sixth panel

The sixth tapestry presents a mystery. The Lady places the necklace she has worn in the previous five panels into a jewel case as she stands in front of a grand pavilion, with a lion and the unicorn holding the flaps of the entrance open. Above the entrance, emblazoned in gold, is the phrase 'A Mon Seul Désir' (To my sole desire). Is she greedily taking the jewels or is she virtuously renouncing them and thrusting the jewels back into the casket? Some interpret this tapestry as a renunciation of the five senses and the refusal of temptation, while some argue that it shows that love is the sixth sense. Another interpretation is that it depicts the power of the intellect as the sixth sense.

Regardless of the various interpretations of the tapestries, these captivating images,



△ Taste



Smell ▷



◁ Hearing

Touch ▷



▽ Sight

▷ A Mon Seul Désir
(To my sole desire)

remarkably preserved for more than 500 years, will continue to captivate, intrigue and be appreciated by lovers of art and culture.

Note: *The lady and the unicorn* by Tracy Chevalier is recommended by Alta Oosthuizen in her list of favourite titles in the article, Summer Reading on page 21.

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