

ESTHER AND AHASUERUS



c. 1460-1485

Flanders

Tapestry

Acc:16.721

G340

LABEL

This tapestry probably belonged to a set depicting the Old Testament story of Esther. A beautiful young Jewish woman, Esther, was the queen of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) of Persia. When the king's chief advisor, Haman (front, left of pillar), ordered all the Jews in Persia killed, Esther appealed to the king. At the left, Ahasuerus (on his throne) receives Esther (crowned and kneeling) and agrees to attend a banquet she has prepared. At the banquet (right), Esther asks Ahasuerus, who had not known she was Jewish, to spare her people. He grants her request, and Haman is later put to death. The feast of Purim, still celebrated today, commemorates this deliverance of the Jewish people. In typical medieval style, events occurring at different times are shown together. This tapestry is a fragment from the center

of a larger piece that had at least three major scenes and several smaller ones. The story of Esther is also depicted on a 17th century embroidered box in gallery 310.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES:

1. What seems to be happening in this tapestry?
2. Who seem to be the principal figures in this tapestry?
3. Where and how do you think these tapestries might have been used?

KEY IDEAS:

BACKGROUND

1. Gothic is a term used to describe art from the period between the decline of Byzantine and Romanesque art and the rise of the Renaissance. Generally this is the period between 1300—1500 A.D. Italy is an exception with the Renaissance beginning in the 1400's and ultimately spreading to the northern countries where it triumphed over the late Gothic style in the 1500's. Most Gothic art was ecclesiastical.
2. Woven fabrics as an art form predate western civilization, but early weavers in the west were monks working in the tranquility of the monastery producing devout work to beautify the house of God. But during the 13th and 14th centuries the romanticism and mystery of Gothic art became highly influential in woven tapestry art. By the early 14th century a sizeable secular industry capable of producing a steady volume of large, high-quality tapestries arose in the towns of northern France and the southern Netherlands.
3. The most popular images for tapestries were Biblical stories, myth, allegories and contemporary scenes. Victories and battle scenes were commissioned by victorious monarchs after the early 1500's.



Hunt for the Unicorn



Vandanges au Chateau

Tapestries provided a form of castle and estate chamber insulation and decoration that could be easily transported. Tapestries became a favorite means of displaying wealth, power, and status. While nobles might have collections of 200-300 pieces,

many royal households had even larger collections. (A 1547 inventory of Henry VIII's possessions after his death reveals that he had over 2000 tapestries).

4. The development of a tapestry had three stages:
 - The first was the design/artist's sketch usually based on texts provided by a poet or scholar. Sometimes the design was based on the client's request, e.g. a battle scene. The sketch was usually a small, finished drawing but sometimes a standard sized painting.
 - The designer's sketch then went to a specialized painter called a cartoonist who rendered the sketch into a full sized work plan (cartoon) intended as a model for the weavers. These were typically great sheets of paper with the names of the colors often simply printed on the black and white drawing.
 - The weaver then wove the pictorial design which was the cartoonist's interpretation of the artist's original work. In the process, the weaver refined the work by imposing on it the conventions and limitations of his craft.
5. Weavers used two types of looms: an upright, high warp loom or a low warp loom. Both produced the same sort of fabric. In the high warp loom the warps ran vertically and weaver stood before the loom and passed the horizontal weft fiber using the bobbin between the stronger warp strands that give the fabric structure and strength. The pattern of the cartoon was traced on the bare warps to guide the weaver and the cartoon is hung behind the loom as a reference. In the low warp loom the warp strands ran horizontally which turned the loom into a large table loom with foot pedals. The cartoon was folded or cut into strips and placed directly beneath the warp strands to guide the weaver. The table loom allowed the weaver to use both hands while weaving so it was faster and cheaper. In both cases the weavers worked on the back of the fabric and viewed the reverse of the image being woven.



High Warp Loom



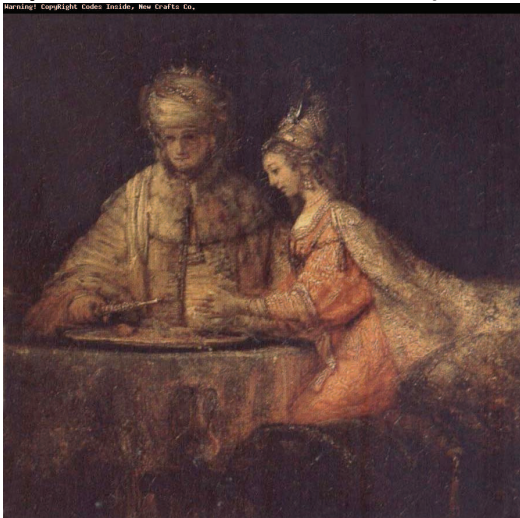
Low Warp Loom

6. Wool—from England or Spain—was most frequently used in tapestry production. From the 15th century silk was often combined with wool to produce finer work, give textural contrast, and introduce highlights. For sumptuous effects, weavers often used metallic yarns of gold or silver color. Colors were initially limited, but by the 18th century well over 1500 colors of yarn were available.

7. High quality weavers might produce half a square yard a month or less. A large tapestry 5 yards wide and 8 yards tall would take five weavers eight months to weave. Most European tapestry wall hangings have a height of 8-14 feet exceeding the arm span of a single weaver. Consequently several weavers had to work side by side to construct a single tapestry.
8. After the defeat of the French by English at Agincourt in 1415, centers of tapestry weaving shifted from France to the Low Countries in towns such as Arras, Lille, Tournai, and Brussels. By the end of the 15th century Brussels dominated the industry which had become the principal seat of the Burgundian court and emerged as a center of artistic and commercial activity. This began the “Golden Age” of tapestry weaving as the Low Country masters refined and perfected their techniques in order to reproduce the painterly effects of the artist’s work. Some have referred to these beautiful tapestries as “the frescos of the north.”

ESTHER AND AHASUERUS TAPESTRY

9. The MIA Esther tapestry once hung in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City as part of the famous J.P. Morgan tapestry collection. The MIA acquired the work when the collection was sold and dispersed in 1916. Tapestries woven before 1528 were rarely associated with a workshop or a particular weaver, but notice that in the lower right hand corner just above the scroll a small fleuron which is probably the mark of the workshop for this piece.
10. Although records show the Esther and Ahasuerus theme was a very popular artist’s theme in the middle ages, only a few tapestries on this subject have survived until today (Museum of Nancy, a fragment in the Louvre, the Victoria and Albert Museum, a private collection and the MIA).



Rembrandt, Esther and Ahasuerus



Detail, Esther and Ahasuerus at the V&A

11. Esther, an orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai, was chosen by king Ahasuerus (5th century B.C.) to replace his previous queen who had defied him. The king, unaware that Esther was Jewish, was influenced by his senior advisor Haman to issue a decree to kill and extirpate all Jews from the kingdom of Persia. (Mordecai had refused to bow down to Haman maintaining that he would bow to no one but his God). Esther was prevailed upon to seek an audience with the king (even though she was not to approach the king upon the pain of death unless summoned). However, the king was pleased to see her and held out his scepter in welcome and promised to grant her any wish up to half his kingdom. She asked for two banquets—that evening and the next day. During the banquet the next evening she admitted she was Jewish and told the king of Haman’s plan to massacre all the Jews. The king became enraged and had Haman hanged on the gallows Haman had built for Mordecai. The king then appointed Mordecai his prime minister and gave the Jews the right to defend themselves against any enemy. The Jews established an annual feast, the feast of Purim, in memory of their deliverance. The Christian church saw Esther’s plea’s to the king as a prefiguration of the Virgin in her role of intercessor on the Day of Judgment thus this scene became the central feature in Christian art.



Claeissens, Esther before King Ahasuerus with Haman Sent to the Gallows beyond

12. Medieval tapestries were often hung with sections of the design obscured by furnishings or architectural features. This encouraged the development of a design style where the narrative was distributed over the entire surface of the tapestry and emphasis was placed on line and pattern rather than “volumetric” illusion. Two such scenes are illustrated in this tapestry. In the upper left hand corner of the composition Esther keels in prayer before a window through which Mordecai is seen giving her instructions. At the left of the column Esther also appears at prayer. (These scenes summarize the fourth chapter of Esther and set the scene for the request of a boon which takes place at the banquet to the right of the pillar).
13. This tapestry is exceptionally well preserved with strong but harmonious coloring—deep blues, soft rose pinks, shades of green and brown—which “all blend together in a

harmony of unusual charm. Also notable are the delicate patterns of the brocaded costumes and the detailed representation of table furnishings illustrating the luxuries of the nobility in the 15th century.

14. High quality tapestries like this were originally only hung for special occasions. Over time and due to changes in fashion many ended up as permanent fixtures which hastened the fading of their colors and their deterioration. (Tapestries originally hung by the English king William III in the royal palaces in the late 17th century stayed up until they were removed and presumably destroyed in the mid-19th century). Today only 30 of Henry VIII's tapestries survive. Many French tapestries were destroyed in the French Revolution as well as many Vatican tapestries after the French occupation of Rome in 1797 and 1814 for their metallic threads. Benign neglect and active vandalism have insured that only a fraction of the great medieval and Renaissance era tapestries have survived.

References

1. European Tapestries: A Primer. Docent OOM research paper.
2. Thomas Campbell, Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002.
3. Esther, Wikipedia.
4. The Esther Tapestry, MIA publication, 1916.