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NOTES ON PICTURES AND WORKS OF ART IN THE ROYAL COLLECTIONS—XXXVII

BY LIONEL CUST

THE GOBELINS TAPESTRIES—II



WAR is ever the greatest enemy of the fine arts, which wither and die under its privations, even if they do not actually fall victims to its ravages. The Gobelins factory, which had flourished so successfully since its institution in 1667 under the fostering care of Colbert, and the direction of the painters, Charles le Brun and Mignard, was suspended during the great war of Louis XIV, and was not reopened until after the peace of Ryswyck in 1697, under the directorship of Jules Hardouin Mansart, the architect. The reopening of the factory was marked by a new series of models, ordered by Mansart from Claude Audran the younger. This was a series known as *Les Portières des Dieux*. These tapestries, which measure in most cases about 12 ft. high by 9 ft. 3 in. broad, were, as their title denotes, designed to hang as coverings to doors. The designs were in two sets of four each, one of *The Four Seasons*, in which spring was represented by Venus, summer by Ceres, autumn by Bacchus, and winter by Saturn; and *The Four Elements*, in which air was represented by Juno, earth by Diana, water by Neptune, and fire by Jupiter. The whole series, however, was known as the *Portières des Dieux*. We learn from M. Fenaille that the designs were the joint composition of several leading artists, Claude Audran supplying the design of the whole, Louis de Boullogne and Corneille the figures, and Desportes the animals. The models were set on the looms in 1700 in the *Ateliers* of the *basse-lisse*, and in 1701 in those of the *haute-lisse*. Two borders were designed, one in a rich frame with cartouches and palmette ornaments on a blue ground for the tapestry executed in gold and silver, the other with pilasters bearing female heads and shell ornaments. In 1740-44 a new series of the *Portières des Dieux* was put in hand, copied in reverse of the original *basse-lisse* series on the *haute-lisse* in the famous atelier of Neilson. A new border was designed with *fleurs-de-lys* in the angles. This *tenture* was successful, some being sold to England, and continued to be worked until 1773. Ten tapestries of this set, two of the Neptune, two of the Venus, three of the Bacchus, one Ceres [PLATE I], one Saturn, and one Juno, were given to the Citoyen Chapeau-Rouge in 1796. Meanwhile Neilson had issued a fourth set, this time on a crimson ground, these being particularly suitable for diplomatic gifts. Three of the crimson ground tapestries were given to Citoyen Chapeau-Rouge, a Jupiter, a Diana and a Neptune. These are all now in the Royal Collection at Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle.

The most famous *tentures* issued by the Gobelins

factory during the reign of Louis XV were the series of *The Story of Esther* and *Jason and Medea*. The models were entrusted to the painter, Jean Francois de Troy, Director of the French Academy at Rome, and the paintings were executed at Rome and forwarded thence to Paris in the years 1737-1740, *L'Évanouissement d'Esther* in 1737, *Le Couronnement* [PLATE II] and *La Toilettte* in 1738, *Le Triomphe de Mardochée* and *Le Repas d'Esther* in 1739, *Le Dédain de Mardochée* and *La Condamnation d'Aman* in 1740. The paintings are now in the Louvre at Paris and were engraved in reverse by Beauvarlet. One of them, *Le Triomphe de Mardochée*, was engraved by Parrocel. The first *tenture* was put on the looms in the *Atelier* Audran in 1738, and a border was designed by Perrot, being a sculptured frame with shells and with *fleurs-de-lys* in the corners. The *tenture* was successful and was repeated several times between 1738 and 1795 either in the *Atelier* Audran or the *Atelier* Cozette. A complete set of seven subjects and one duplicate of *Le Dédain de Mardochée* were assigned to the Citoyen Chapeau-Rouge in 1797 at a valuation of over fifty thousand livres. These were all included in the purchase made by Sir Charles Long, the complete set being in the Audience and Presence Chambers at Windsor Castle, and the duplicate piece at Buckingham Palace.

The series illustrating the *Story of Jason and Medea* was originally a commission given to the painter, J. B. Oudry, at the Beauvais factory, but as he failed to undertake the commission, it was given to J. F. de Troy at Rome. The paintings to be used as models were painted at Rome and sent to Paris during the years 1743-46. They were exhibited at the Salon of 1748, and remained at the Gobelins until 1794. They are now dispersed among the provincial museums in France. The seven pictures represented *La Toison d'Or*, *Jason domptant les Taureaux*, *Jason recevant de Médée l'Herbe Enchantée*, *Jason semant les Dents du Dragon*, *Jason épousant Créuse*, *Créuse revêtue de la Robe Empoisonnée*, *Médée fuit après avoir tué ses Enfants*.

The *tentures* were placed on the looms in 1749, in the *Atelier* Audran, and again in 1750 in the *Atelier* Cozette. A border was designed by Checillon for the former *Atelier* and by Gravelot for the latter. The *tenture* was very successful and was continually on the looms up to the French Revolution, one *tenture*, the twelfth in number, being incomplete at that date. Owing to the great size of the subject, *Jason domptant les Taureaux*, which took some years to complete, some of the *tentures* lack this subject. A singular historical interest attached itself to the first *tenture* completed in 1758, and delivered to the royal *garde-meuble*. In 1770, when the Arch-Duchess Marie Antoinette

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of Austria started on her journey from Vienna to Paris, as the affianced bride of the Dauphin, it was arranged that she should be received at Strasbourg in an island on the Rhine, which then formed the frontier between France and Germany, and that in a pavilion specially erected on this island the arch-duchess should discard her Austrian clothes and put on robes specially made in France, and should exchange her Austrian suite for one composed of French nobility specially selected by the king. In order that the pavilion might be richly decorated, use was made of the latest triumph of the Gobelins factory, the tapestry of *Jason and Medea*. It so happened that Goethe was then a young student at Strasbourg, and a witness of the ceremony of arrival and its surroundings. In his journal Goethe has recorded his astonishment at the selection of tapestry to adorn the bridal pavilion. A young girl, leaving her home for the first time, arriving in a strange country, and about to enter on life as the wife of a husband whom she had not yet seen, was confronted on her first arrival in France with great tapestry-pictures on which was shown the terrible conjugal tragedy of Jason and Creusa. There is no evidence to show that Marie Antoinette paid much attention to the tapestry, or that she or anyone else present regarded it as of evil omen for the future. In the light of future events, it does seem a singular selection to have been made on such an occasion.

Of the various *tentures*, one completed in 1774, with the exception of the *Taureaux*, was given in 1786 to Baron de Breteuil, and on his not requiring them, was given in 1787, with the addition of the *Taureaux*, to the Comte de Vergennes. This appears to be the set which was purchased in 1800 by the Earl of Mansfield, and is now in the possession of Lord Burton. In 1780 the notorious Cardinal Louis de Rohan, Bishop of Strasbourg, so closely connected with the tragedy of Marie Antoinette, visited the Gobelins to choose a *tenture* as a gift from the king. He selected one of *Jason and Medea*, which had just been completed. Four pieces of this *tenture* now belong to the Drapers' Company in London. In 1792 a set of six, the *Taureaux* being wanting, two duplicates, were sold to the Citoyen Chapeau-Rouge at Hamburg. These are now in the royal collection at Windsor Castle or Buckingham Palace. Very few complete sets of this *tenture* exist, but a considerable number of detached pieces are distributed among the French embassies at Rome and elsewhere.

The change of tone in the reign of Louis XV is well illustrated at the Gobelins factory. To the great historic series of *Esther* and *Jason*, really fine conceptions, grandly executed, succeeded the more voluptuous subjects known as *Les Amours des Dieux* and *Les Tentures de François Boucher*. These were executed under the Marquis de

Marigny, brother of the reigning mistress, M^{de} de Pompadour. The *tenture* of *Les Amours des Dieux* does not seem to have consisted of a fixed number of subjects, but the first four paintings sent in were exhibited at the Salon in 1757, and placed on the looms at the Gobelins. These four paintings were *Venus commandant à Vulcan des Armes pour Énée*, by François Boucher, painted specially for M^{de} de Pompadour, *L'Enlèvement d'Europe*, by J. B. M. Pierre, for M. de Marigny, *Amimone, poursuivie par Pan, se réfugie dans les bras de Neptune*, by Carle Van Loo, also for M. de Marigny, and *Sacrifice à Ceres* or *L'Enlèvement de Proserpine* by J. M. Vien. Other subjects were added by the painters Pierre, Noel Hallé, Fragonard, Taraval, Clément Belle and Lagrenée, but they were not all carried out in tapestry. From one *tenture* made in the *Atelier* Cozette in 1787 two subjects, *L'Enlèvement d'Europe* and *L'Enlèvement de Proserpine*, were selected for sale to the Citoyen Chapeau-Rouge. These two tapestries are now at Buckingham Palace.

The *tentures* designed by Boucher for M^{de} de Pompadour and the Marquis de Marigny were very popular with foreign buyers, especially those worked on a crimson ground; several were purchased for noblemen's houses in England, and are now to be seen at Welbeck Abbey, Osterley, Newby and elsewhere. No one of these tapestries was sold to the Citoyen Chapeau-Rouge, so that there is no example in the royal collection.

A freak of fashion having brought Turkish habits and costumes into vogue, a special series of tapestry, illustrating scenes from Turkish life was ordered by M. de Marigny in 1754, to decorate M^{de} de Pompadour's house at Bellevue. The paintings were originally entrusted to Carle Van Loo. The first subject represented M^{de} de Pompadour herself dressed as a Sultana and smoking a pipe; this was engraved by Beauvarlet. Only three subjects were completed by Carle Van Loo, and the *tenture* was laid aside until 1772, then a new set, entitled *Usages et Modes du Levant* was painted by Amédée Van Loo, the four paintings completed being exhibited at the Salon of 1775; a fifth intended was not completed. The four subjects carried out in tapestry were known as *Le Déjeuner*, *La Toilette*, *La Danse*, and *Le Travail*. These were put in hand in 1777 at the *Atelier* Audran, with a border designed by Tessier. Three pieces of this series, *Le Travail*, *Le Déjeuner* and *La Toilette*, were sold to the Citoyen Chapeau-Rouge in 1797 and appear among those purchased in 1827. They do not appear to have been made use of, and have not been traced at present.

In 1775 the *Atelier* Neilson commenced work on a series of older designs which had been laid aside. These were the series of four paintings by Charles Coypel from the popular opera, "*Armide et Renard*", by Quinault, with music by Lully.



THE CROWNING OF ESTHER, AFTER J. F. DE TROY. TAPESTRY BY COZETTE. (H. M. THE KING, WINDSOR CASTLE)

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The paintings were completed at intervals from 1733 to 1741, that last completed, *Le Sommeil de Renaud*, being now in the Musée at Nantes. The series was not much in demand, but of the *tenture* commenced in 1775 and finished in 1783-4, one piece, *Le Sommeil de Renaud*, was among those sold to the Citoyen Chapeau-Rouge, and is now at Buckingham Palace.

The numbers purchased by Sir Charles Long included one large piece of S. John the Baptist baptizing the Saviour, which is now in Buckingham Palace. This may be one of the series of subjects from the New Testament designed by Jouvenet and Restout. Eight pieces of *L'Histoire de Saint Jean Baptiste* were among those destroyed by the Directoire in 1797. Two pieces on a smaller scale, intended for *sopra-porte*, complete the purchase made by Sir Charles Long.

There are a few other pieces of Gobelins tapestry in the royal collection which have been acquired through private sources. In 1714 Charles Coypel designed a series of scenes from the *Story of Don Quixote*, which were very popular, and were executed with different borders, the first *tenture* being begun in 1717. As in the case of the *Portières des Dieux*, those woven on crimson grounds belong to the latest series of *tentures*, and were very popular, some finding their way to England. Four pieces made in the *Atelier* Cozette were purchased by the Duke of Richmond in 1766, when ambassador at Paris. In 1788 four pieces came into the possession of the painter, Richard Cosway, and are probably identical with the four pieces acquired by George IV now in the royal collection at Marlborough House. A complete set of nine pieces on crimson ground, which originally belonged to the Marquis de la Vrillière, were purchased in 1814 by the Duke of Rutland, and are now at Belvoir Castle, in the Long Gallery.

Previous to the foundation of the Gobelins factory a private factory had been set up by Nicolas Foucquet, Surintendant des finances, at Maincy, near his famous Chateau de Vaux. The *Atelier* was under the direction of the painter, Charles Le Brun. The *Atelier*, however, did not survive the disgrace of its founder, and its possessions and workmen, most of whom were Flemings, were absorbed into the new factory at the Gobelins. Among the *tentures* designed by Le Brun for the Maincy *Atelier* was one illustrating *The Story of*

Meleager and Atalanta. A complete *tenture* of six pieces was completed in 1668, and one was, in 1789, at the Trianon, which, having been worked with gold, was probably destroyed during the Revolution. Two paintings, however, attributed to Le Brun were at the Gobelins in 1809, and were then purchased for the Louvre. They represent *La Chasse de Sanglier* and *La Mort de Meleager*. Two tapestries executed from these paintings at the Gobelins were presented to Queen Victoria by King Louis Philippe after the royal visit to the Chateau d'Eu in September 1843, and are now at Windsor Castle.

During the 19th century the skill of the Gobelins workmen was devoted to copying well known and not particularly interesting paintings by leading artists. The quality of the work and the skill of the worker began to be considered to be of greater import than the choice of subject to be rendered. The consequence was that throughout this period of industrial revival the government factories of tapestry at the Gobelins and of porcelain at Sèvres were occupied in producing works of art, executed with impeccable skill, but entirely devoid of any artistic inspiration. At the International Exhibition of 1851 there was exhibited from the Gobelins a large tapestry representing *Le Massacre des Mamelukes* from a painting by Horace Vernet, now in the museum at Amiens. This was offered as a gift to Queen Victoria, and is now at Marlborough House.

In 1870 the Gobelins factory fell a victim to the mad fury of the Commune, and all its models, stores of tapestry and appliances were burnt. Resuscitated from its ashes, the factory still maintains a number of workpeople, endowed with that wonderful skill of execution which has always been the proud prerogative of the French nation. The glory, however, of the Gobelins factory ended with the French Revolution, since when it has been a survival. Thanks to the careful research and skill of narration employed by M. Maurice Fenaille, it is possible to trace the history of almost every piece of tapestry executed at the Gobelins factory. No finer specimens of the best period can be seen than those which, having passed through the hands of Citoyen Chapeau-Rouge, whoever he may have been, reverted to their original destination as decorations to the Palace of a King.