

### THE LADY AND THE UNICORN

Paris (models), circa 1500, wool and silk

#### TOUCH

H. 3,70, L. 3,50 m ; Cl. 10835

The lady stands with her right hand firmly holding up the pennant and her left hand slightly brushing the unicorn's horn. This tapestry shows several unique oddities. The unicorn looks smaller than in the other tapestries and the lion has a number of striking features, such as bulging eyes, a wide mouth and pointed ears. Among the animals in the background, two monkeys held captive can be spotted, as well as a wolf, a panther and a cheetah, all collared. The lady's hair hangs loose and is held with a diadem. She wears a blue velvet dress lined with ermine, highlighted with goldsmith work and large gold embroidered fabrics named orphreys.



#### ORIGIN

The tapestries were located as early as 1814 in the Boussac Castle in the French Department of Creuse and were mentioned in 1841 by French writer Prosper Mérimée, then Inspector General of Historic Monuments, who was concerned over their storage conditions and suggested their acquisition by King Louis-Philippe. During the same period the tapestries were met with an enthusiastic reaction by French woman writer George Sand who dedicated a few lines to the « curious and cryptic tapestries ». It was only in 1882 that the Town of Boussac accepted to sell them to the State for 25,500 Francs. On 9th June, the Historic Monuments Commission decided to grant that sum of money for their purchase by the Musée de Cluny which received the tapestries in July of the same year.

#### DESCRIPTION ET INTERPRETATION

The six tapestries are obviously part of the same ensemble. The balanced and sober compositions set on a red Mille Fleur background depict a scene in which the main protagonist is a lady, occasionally with her lady companion and always accompanied by a lion and a unicorn.

The unicorn alternates active and contemplative parts and bears a coat of arms as does the lion. The mystery of the tapestries which intrigued George Sand mostly lies in its meaning which has been subjected to numerous interpretations. Five of the six pieces are generally admitted to represent the five senses. The choice in the presentation is based on Medieval texts which established a hierarchy of the senses according to their proximity with the spiritual sphere, starting with touch, followed by Taste, Smell, Hearing and Ending with the Sight. The last tapestry raises numerous questions : are we presented with a sixth sense ?

#### TASTE

H. 3,70, L. 4,60 m ; Cl. 10831

The lady delicately grasps a sweet from a bowl held by her lady companion to feed the parrot on her gloved hand. In front of her, a monkey is eating a fruit thus giving the picture its meaning. The ample and harmonious composition revolves around the triangle formed by the two women. In the background, the fence covered in roses adds more depth and encloses the scene. The calm gestures of the young women stand in sharp contrast with the lively movements of the lion and the unicorn, dressed in armoured capes which look like they are floating in the wind. Several animals inhabit The Mille Fleur background including a hornless young unicorn. The garments and adornments stand out with details like laced openings on the Lady's dress and her companion's sleeves and the vegetal ornaments on the jewelry, like flowers on the necklaces, headbands and hairnets, and the pomegranate on the Lady's pendant belt.



#### SMELL

H. 3,60, L. 3,10 m ; Cl.10832

The Lady is making a wreath of flowers with the carnations on a tray presented by the lady companion. A monkey in the background is smelling a rose, thus reinforcing the allegory. The lion and the unicorn stand still, the former wearing a shield and the latter a target. The Lady and the lady companion's garments are pulled up and one can see their undergarment called the cotte.

The Lady's hair is almost entirely covered by a short headdress divided with rows of pearls and bordered with gems and pearls. The lady companion's hair is styled on the sides with locks held by ribbons and is only covered with a short band.



1483-1498

Reign of Charles VIII of France

1485-1510

Jacques d'Amboise,  
abbot of Cluny

Around 1490-1510

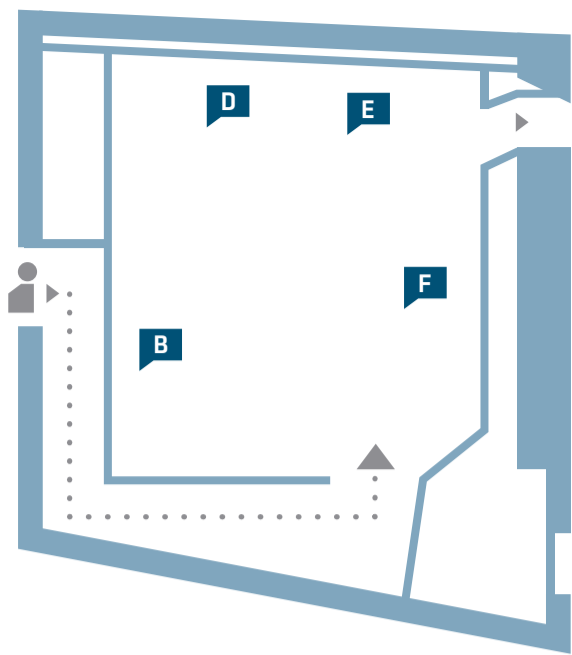
Active years of the Master of the "Très Petites Heures"  
(a Christian devotional book) of Queen Anne of Brittany

1498-1515

Reign of Louis XII of France

1507-1509

The Praise of Folly,  
Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam



**B** Coat of arms of the Le Viste family

## MON SEUL DÉSIR

H. 3,70, L. 4,60 m ; Cl. 10834

In front of a tent kept open by the lion and the unicorn, which simultaneously hold onto the pennants, a casket is presented by the lady companion. Does the lady pick a jewel or does she put back a necklace which is strikingly similar to the one she wears in the "Taste" tapestry? Regardless of the answer, she already selected the pieces she has on her with spiral motifs, pearls and fleurettes (small flowers). The composition is again pyramid-shaped and very ample and revolves around a group complete with a small dog which already appeared in the "Taste" tapestry. Here the aigrette headdress has been passed to the lady companion. The motto written at the top of the tent not only gives the tapestry its name, but has also elicited a number of commentaries and speculations. This sixth piece is said to illustrate a "sixth sense" closest to the soul or to the world of the mind which according to the theory developed in the work of Jean Gerson in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century may be the Heart itself.

## HEARING

H. 3,60, L. 2,80 m ; Cl. 10833

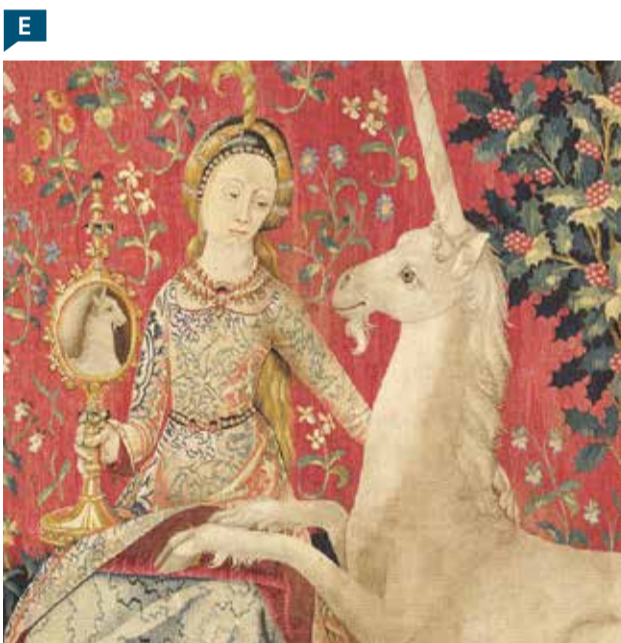
The Lady plays a portative organ which bellows are operated by the lady companion. The instrument is placed on an oriental rug and its posts are decorated with a unicorn and a lion. The composition is quite narrow, with the banners hiding the trees in front of which they are placed. The front of the unicorn is the only visible part and is slightly out of proportion. The lady is absorbed in her music. She wears a blue dress with a low-cut surcot made with a precious fabric adorned with motifs of pomegranate similar to the dresses in the other tapestries. Her hair is braided on the sides of her head and styled in an aigrette. The lady companion wears a simpler short veil.

## SIGHT

H. 3,10, L. 3,20 m ; Cl. 10836

The lady is seated and strokes the unicorn with her left hand. The front legs of the unicorn rest on the lady's lap and it gazes at itself in the mirror - a precious piece of gold work - where the reflection it sees appears to be not his. As in the "Touch" tapestry, the unicorn plays an active role in the allegory instead of simply bearing coats of arms. The pyramid-shaped composition is framed by two low trees as if to direct the focus on the central scene. The only pennant is held by the lion which seems to look the other way. The aigrette headdress is similar to the one in the "Hearing" tapestry. In the background a lion cub, a dog and a rabbit also seem to take part to the looking game.

Medieval thought accepted simultaneous complementary explanations so it is possible that these allegories had other, more down-to-earth meanings. The Heart was indeed the origin of moral life as well as human love and carnal desire altogether. "The Lady and the Unicorn" appear like it belongs to a literary tradition illustrated by the following verses of the poet Charles d'Orléans (1394-1465): "Of loyal heart, content with joy/My mistress, my only desire/ More than any other, I wish to serve you/No matter where I am". It would also be limitative to look for the meaning of the unicorn only through its role as a mere bearer of pennants and coats of arms. A well-known symbol of chastity, the unicorn, which main attribute also has an obvious sexual connotation was regarded as a particularly ambivalent creature.



## THE COMMISSION OF THE TAPESTRIES

The coat of arms - red with a blue band set with three silver crescent moons- enabled historians to attribute the commission of the tapestries to the Le Viste family, some members of which occupied key positions in the Paris parliament at the time. The social advancement of the family explains the profusion of heraldry and emblems on the tapestries, a clear will to affirm the power of the family as a whole and of its individual members. This was typical of a lineage with recently acquired richness and power but with lacklustre origins.

The full coat of arms points to an elder son like Jean IV Le Viste, Lord of Arcy, who became head of the family in 1457 and died in 1500, or to his young cousin Antoine who bore the full family arms after the death of Jean IV. In the latter case, the tapestry is likely to have been woven shortly after 1500, perhaps as a celebration of the commissioner's right to bear the full coat of arms, or of his engagement to Jacqueline Raguier. This would explain the letters A and I across the "Mon seul désir" motto, therefore the initials of the groom and bride. This hypothesis is even more likely as the formal and stylistic characteristics link the tapestries to the workshop of the Master of the "Très Petites Heures" (a Christian devotional book) of Queen Anne of Brittany which was very active around 1500. This painter, who worked for both the King and Queen of France and counted many commissioners among high ranking Parisian magistrates and notable clergymen probably designed the models for the tapestries.

Special thanks to Clémence Raynaud

<b>1483-1498</b> Reign of Charles VIII of France	<b>Around 1490-1510</b> Active years of the Master of the "Très Petites Heures" (a Christian devotional book) of Queen Anne of Brittany	<b>1498-1515</b> Reign of Louis XII of France	<b>1500</b> Death of Jean IV Le Viste, succeeded by his young cousin Antoine II as the head of the Family	<b>1517</b> Thèses de Martin Luther
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