

« They are women on islands
A profound feminine solitude
An enchanted solitude »

Yannick Haenel,
To my only desire, 2005

« There are tapestries here [...]
Come, let us pass slowly before them [...]
How peaceful they are, are they not? »

Rainer Maria Rilke,
The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, 1910

« There are six senses,
five outside and one inside,
which is the heart »

Jean Gerson, 1402

The Lady and the Unicorn is exceptional for its originality and by the quality of its execution, born from a collaboration between the painter of the tapestries' original models, the cartoon-maker and the weaver. Despite their eventful history and the various interventions they underwent, the tapestries kept their wide appeal intact. Their recent restoration together with the revamping of the museography were conducted to favour both the quality of conservation and the appreciation of the 15th century masterpiece by the public.

THE LADY AND THE UNICORN

Paris (models), circa 1500 ; wool and silk ;
Cl. 10831-10836

Restoration : Group led by Raphaëlle Déjean with Cécilia Aguirre, Anne Breugnot, Thalia Bouzid, Sylvie Forestier.

Museography : Atelier Cairn, Paul Barnoud, Chief Architect of the Historical Monuments and Céline Girard, National Heritage architect

Lights : François Magos.

Graphic conception : Quartopiano.

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B Taste : choice of the threads used for the restoration. Use of the *battage* woven technique

THE WEAVING

The weaving shows great technical mastery, making the most of all the possibilities offered by an artistic practice then at its peak. The craftsmanship behind this weaving work relies chiefly on a vast array of about thirty different shades and colours. Most of the natural dyes in use here were commonplace at the end of the Medieval era, such as madder for the reds, weld (also called 'dyer's rocket') for the yellows and woad for the blues. But rarer hues can also be identified, such as a dark purple obtained from orcein, a colour extracted from a certain species of lichen. The back of the tapestries are in a much better condition and give a more accurate idea of the original colours featured in the work. This is particularly true of the green palette; the front has faded to blue from the loss of its yellow component. Each of the colours passes through three different gradients - light, medium and dark - masterfully employed by the hand-weaver. Multiple shades were even used within relatively small motifs, such as in the pansies, where up to five shades can be distinguished. Silk is used in relatively small amounts -warp and most of weft threads are made of wool- and is generally beige or ecru, more rarely pink. It helps adding extra sophistication to a few details, such as locks of blond hair and it emphasises the shine on pale satin materials. The multiple possibilities offered by the art of tapestry were used for «The Lady and the Unicorn» such as *battages*, *tissage dans la forme* or decorative relays. Outlines and contours were executed by subtly modulating the fineness of the weaving and the colour gradients.

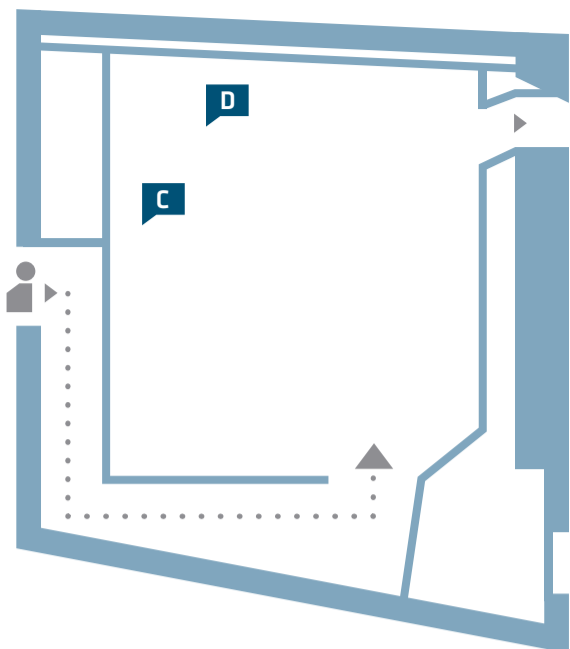
1814
First location of the tapestries
in the Boussac Castle

1841
Report by Prosper Mérimée regarding the storage
conditions of the tapestries and suggesting
their acquisition by the State

1882
Acquisition of the tapestries
by the musée de Cluny

1949
Reopening of the ground floor of the musée
de Cluny after the Second World War

1956
Moving of The Lady and the Unicorn
in a specially arranged rotunda on the first
floor of the museum



C Smell: detail of the consolidation of a decorative relay

STATE OF PRESERVATION & PREVIOUS RESTORATIONS

It is generally admitted that the storage conditions of the tapestries in the 19th century were unfortunately very poor. In 1853, there was a mention of three fragments « which lay abandoned and rolled into a corner of the Bouszac City Hall, where rats and dampness had started attacking at the edges; it will not be long before they cause significant damage ». Upon their arrival at the museum in 1882, the tapestries were subjected to an intervention so that they could be shown to the public. Its purpose was mainly to make up for the missing bottom parts. A first restorer gave up on the task, mentioning among other things « ...That impossible red hue I was able to find nowhere ». The « Veuve Plistat », a tapestry restorer at the Gobelins Manufactory was put in charge of a first intervention in 1882, immediately followed by Lameire in 1883, which chief aim was to « redo » the major parts. However, the painted added elements by Lameire soon turned and the newly appointed museum Director, Alfred Darcel decided to have them woven instead. This operation was entrusted to J. Lavaux, the Gobelins artist upholsterer, who completed it in 1892. During the 1920's the deterioration of the warp became worrying and a survey made at the Gobelins concluded that the tapestries needed overall strengthening. This new intervention started only in 1941 and was conducted by the Atelier Brégère, under the control of a commission which gathered several times to check on the ongoing operations, a practice then only in use for paintings and which attests to the considerable importance of the tapestries right in the middle of the Second World War. It was decided to keep the bottom parts woven by Lavaux in 1889-1892 and to work solely on the missing and extremely damaged ones.

THE 2012-2013 INTERVENTION

The high level of dust in the air which is proven to have an abrasive action on the fibres and was favoured by the exhibition conditions in the rotunda, necessitated a new intervention. It was conducted by a team of curators in three phases: dusting, cleansing and consolidating the woven structure with a new lining, using a special technique to reduce tension in weak spots. The revamping of the room in 2013 constitutes the final phase of the restoration project and was conceived to best fight the dust settings and the excessive pulling on the fibres.

A small glossary of tapestry terms

Battage : a woven technique consisting of systematically alternating picks and passes of two or more colours to delicately colour details and create contours

Warp threads : threads, often of an ecru colour stretched parallel to the warp. Warps are not visible after the weaving as they are covered with wefts which form the motif. The warp-sheet is made of all the threads of the warp.

Pick : a weft thread going back and forth the warp. The first pass covers one warp-sheet and the second one the other. After combing, the warp is covered on both sides by the weft.

Decorative relays : relays result from the interruption of the weft between two warp threads of at least three picks in the height. They are generally sown during - as is the case of the Lady and the Unicorn- or after the weaving of the tapestries. In their decorative version, they are purposely left open to obtain special effects such as rendering the features of a face, the anatomy of an animal and so on.

Tissage dans la forme : a technique where the weaving of picks follows a pattern not necessarily perpendicular to the warp.

Weft threads : threads that pass perpendicular to the warp and through the warp threads with a shuttle. These threads are generally dyed and form the motif of the tapestry.



D 1. Hearing (front) : transparency of the veil obtained with *battage*



D 2. Hearing (back) : restitching in white on the top of the headdress and on the necklace



D 3. Hearing (front)



D 4. Hearing (back) : The green shades of the leaves were preserved

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