

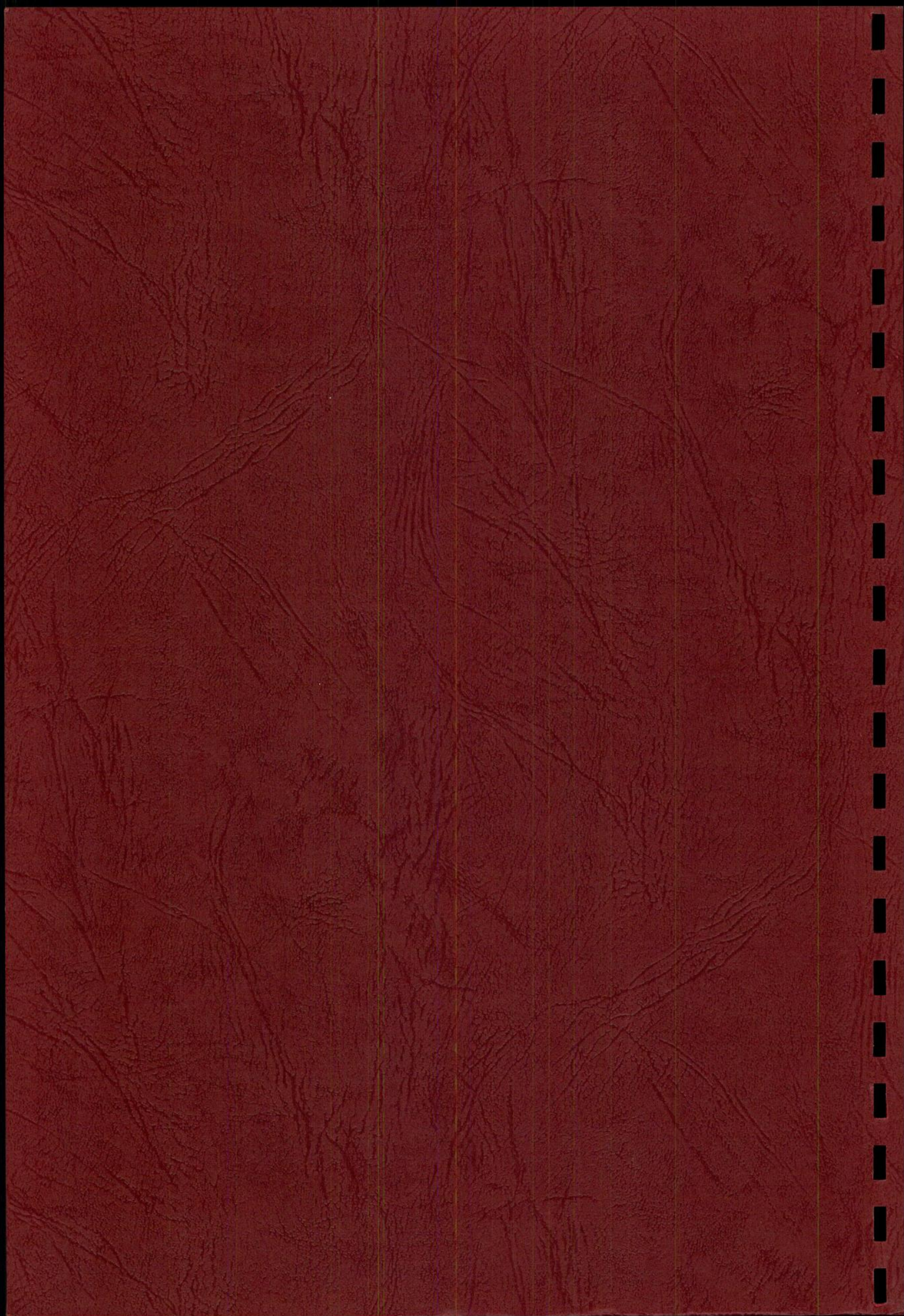
THE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE  
SYMBOLISM OF THE UNICORN IN ANCIENT,  
MEDIEVAL AND MODERN TIMES

LORRAINE DILLON

1992

TEXTILES









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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN  
FACULTY OF TEXTILE DESIGN  
DEPARTMENT OF WEAVE

THE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE SYMBOLISM OF THE  
UNICORN IN ANCIENT, MEDIEVAL AND MODERN TIMES.

BY LORRAINE DILLON  
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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art  
and Design and Complementary Studies  
in candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor  
of Design (Woven Textiles), 1992.





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### Introduction

The sense of mystery and myth, the wildness and untouched appearance, as well as elegance and magnificent beauty, are among the reasons why the one-horned, milk-white Unicorn is the chosen subject for this thesis.

The Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries on permanent exhibition at The Cloisters of the metropolitan museum of Art, New York, and the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries at the Cluny Museum, Paris, must be among the most famous of all the known surviving late Gothic creations. Like the unicorn himself, these tapestries are one of the marvels of the world, for in no other works of art anywhere is this magical creature represented in such astonishing detail, and with such symbolic meaning. Brilliant in technical virtues and with an intricate iconography, these magical series have helped considerably to keep the image of the fabulous one-horned creature, known as the unicorn, alive to the present day. The tale of the unicorn I recall from childhood, is where the only unicorn that every existed (as the name uni-corn may suggest either one unicorn or one horn) was of no sex and so could





never reproduce. However this creature is referred to as being male in the numerous references used throughout the thesis, only being talked of as being female in one source, a film called Legend which is discussed in chapter four.

The story of this magnificent horse-like animal of the tapestries is long and complicated, this imaginary beast being credited with extra-ordinary powers in medieval times and even in our own time it is surrounded by a certain aura of mystery. But where did the unicorn originate? What patrons conceived the plan for these tapestries and what artists elaborated these designs to come up with such superb results? Equally important, what workshops had the sort of craftsmanship capable of weaving such tapestries? These questions are looked at in depth in this thesis, which examines the symbolism of the unicorn throughout history; his associations with christianity, chastity and heraldry. It examines this symbolism in relation to both the Hunt of the Unicorn and the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries, paying particular attention to the fact that the symbolism in both set of tapestries are not very similar, the unicorn being symbolic of a secular nature in one set, the Lady with the Unicorn, but the





symbolism being closely related to religion in the other, the Hunt of the Unicorn. Is there a reason for this? This thesis explores this difference of symbolic meaning in the tapestries, his appearance in relation to what he is symbolising and finally examines the unicorn and his relevance in our world today.







Fig. 1 The Hunt of the Unicorn Tapestries series.  
1. The Start of the Hunt.







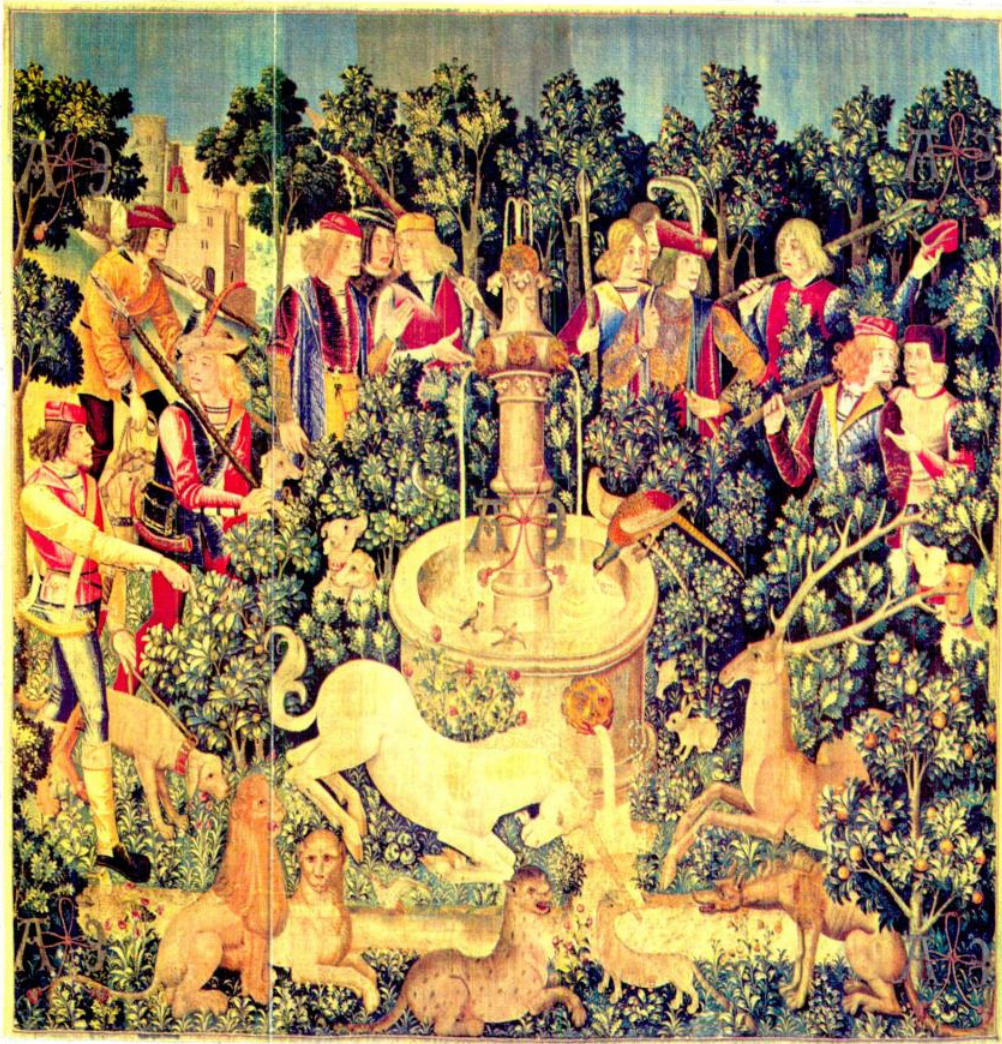


Fig. 2

The Hunt of the Unicorn Tapestry series.  
2. Unicorn Dips His Horn into the stream to  
rid it of poison.



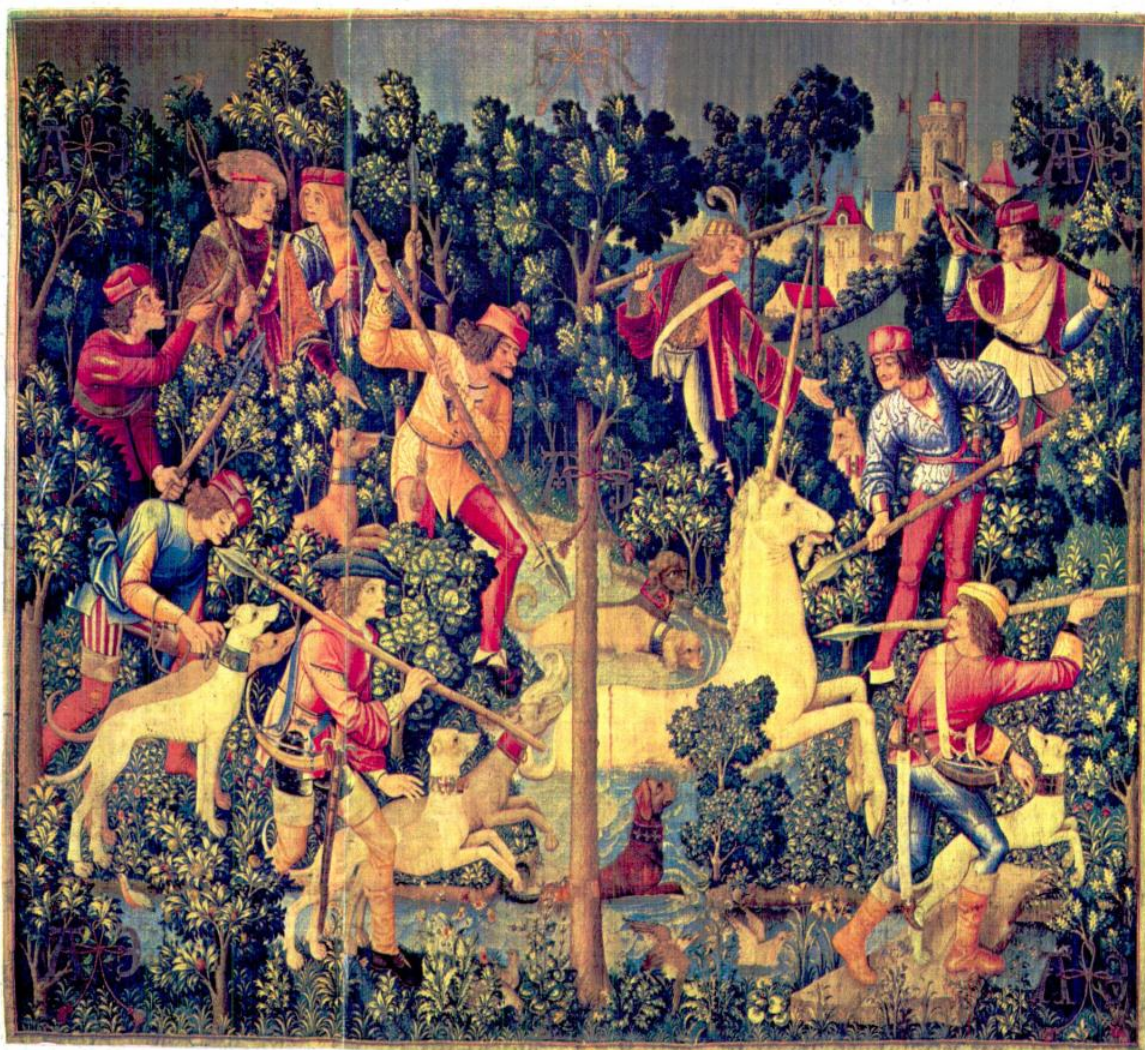


Fig. 3 The Hunt of the Unicorn Tapestry series.  
3. The Unicorn Leaps the Stream.









Fig. 4      The Hunt of the Unicorn Tapestry series.  
4.    The Unicorn Defends Himself.







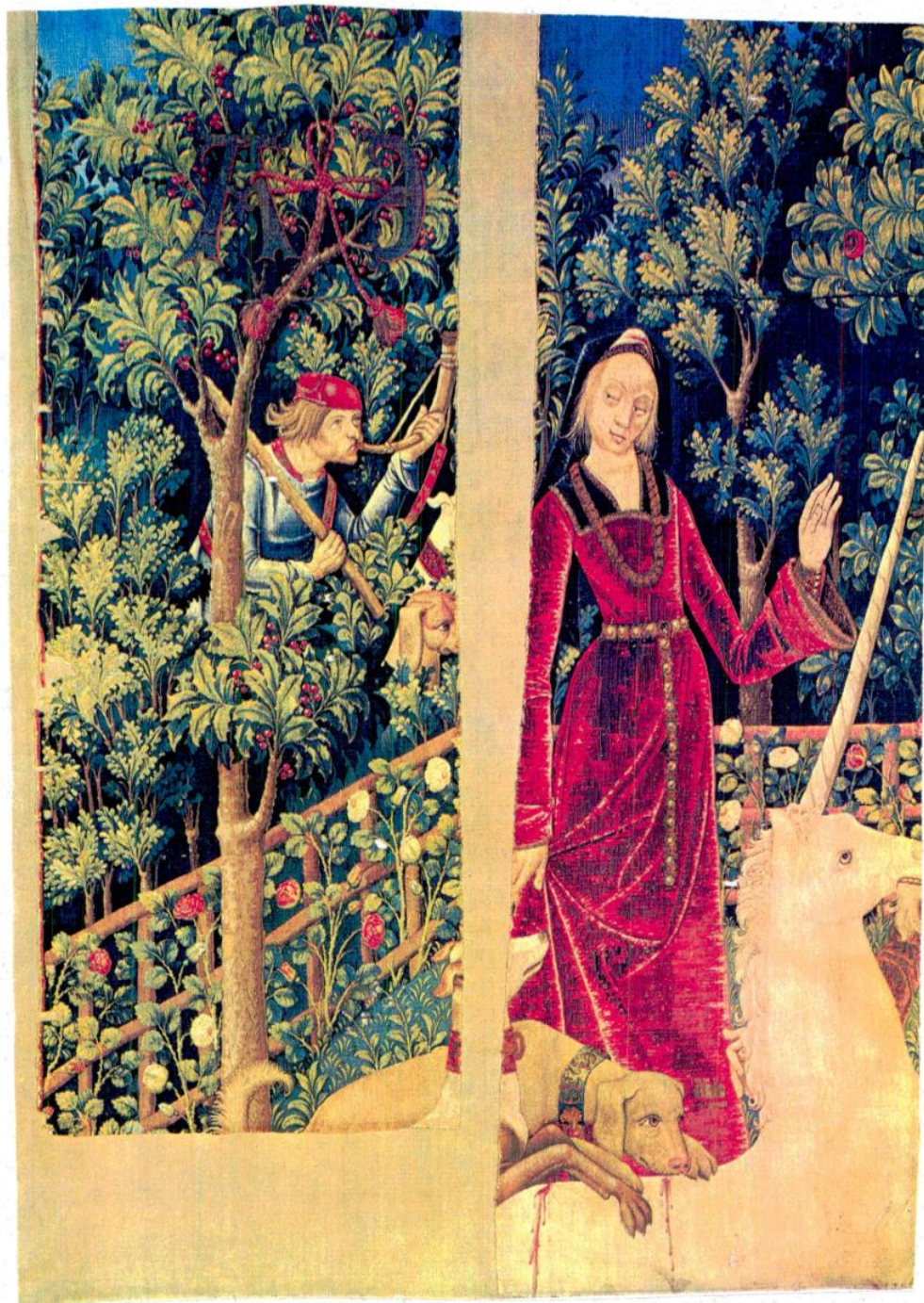


Fig. 5

The Hunt of the Unicorn Tapestry series.  
5. The Unicorn is Tamed by the Maiden.







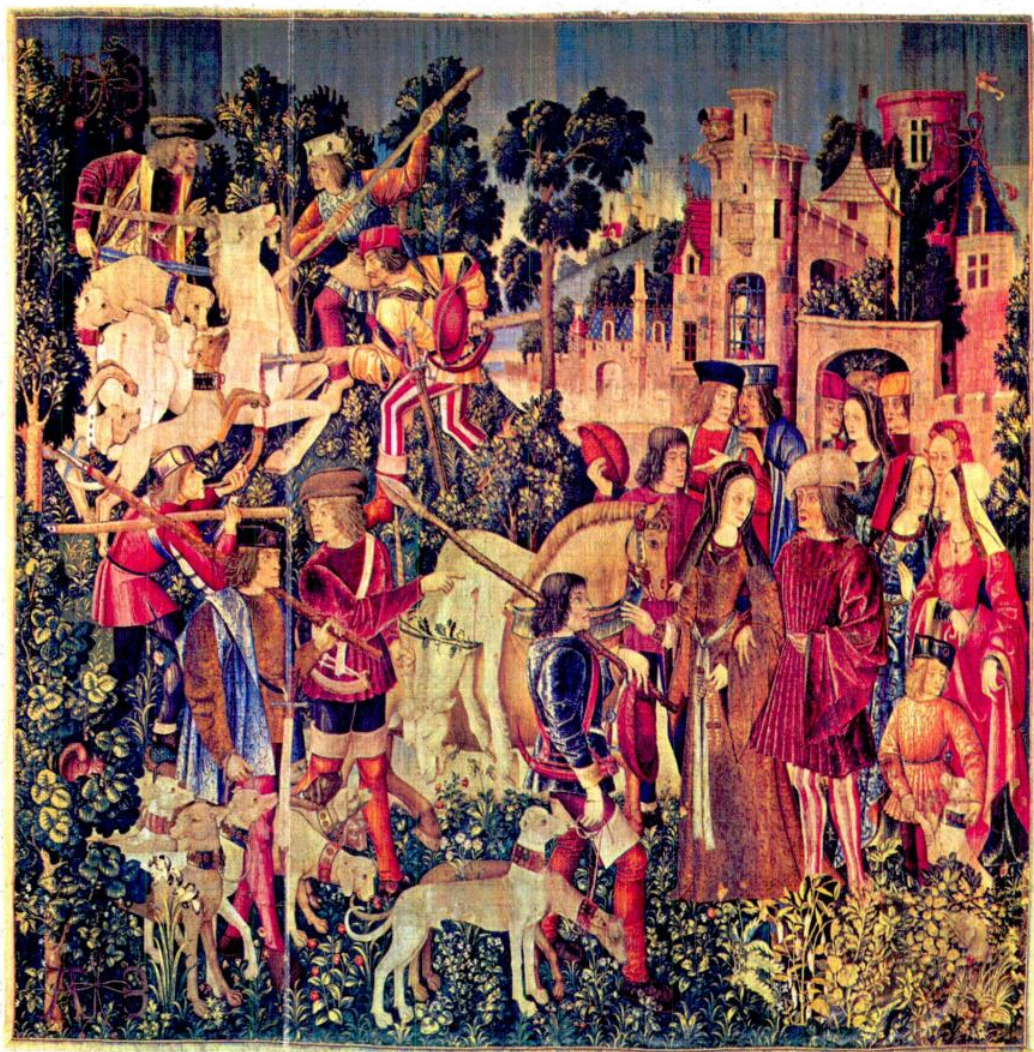


Fig. 6

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## Chapter 1 - The History of the Symbolism of the Unicorn

Playing a minor role the early middle ages, the unicorn in the fifteenth century seems to fill some imaginative need of the people of that time and inspired two great masterpieces of Late Gothic Art, the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries on permanent exhibition at the Cloisters, New York (figs. 1-7), and the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries at the Cluny Museum, Paris (figs. 8-13). Everything about this white pony with a goat's beard, a flowing tail and a long horn growing straight from the middle of its forehead known as the unicorn, is mysterious. This powerful animal which in fact, never existed, leads to some unanswerable questions. What does it really symbolise? and where are its origins?

It is said to have originated in India and it appears in Pliny (9, P.1), who says that it is fierce and dangerous animal, but when it sees a virgin it lays its head submissively in her lap. A Greek book of legends, the Physiologus (9, P.1) makes the unicorn one of the supporters of the Virgin Mary. At least as early as the third century the unicorn was adopted by



Fig. 8      The Lady with the Unicorn Tapestry series.  
1. Sight.







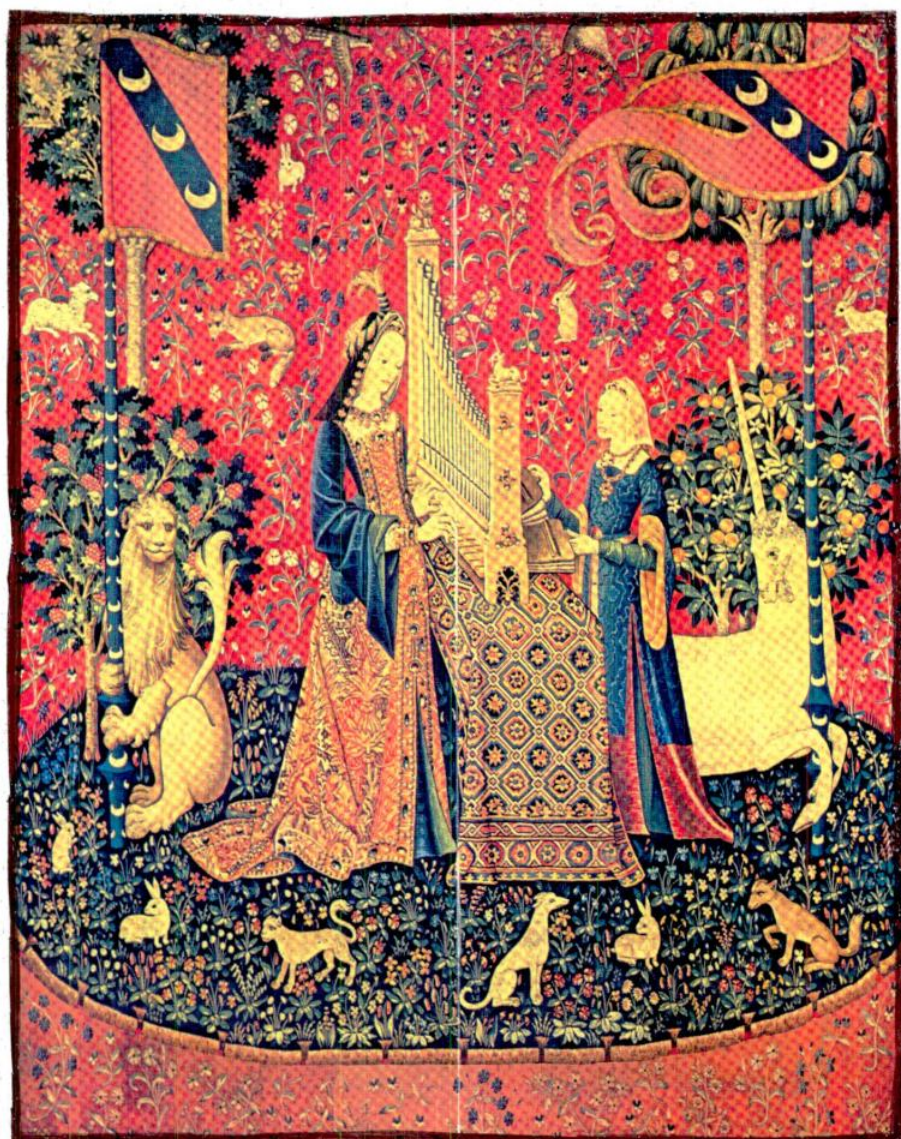


Fig. 9      The Lady with the Unicorn Tapestry series.  
2. Hearing.









Fig. 10

The Lady with the Unicorn Tapestry series.  
3. Smell.









Fig. 11 The Lady with the Unicorn Tapestry series.  
4. Taste.





Fig. 12 The Lady with the Unicorn Tapestry series.  
5. Touch.









Fig. 13 The Lady with the Unicorn Tapestry series.  
6. A Mon Seul Desir.







the christian world, not merely as a remarkable animal that had been described by pagan writers and endorsed by the Bible, but as a symbol of Christ. The pagan philosopher and legal expert, Tertullian, who became a christian about 193, quotes the passage from Deuteronomy, "his horns are like the horns of unicorns" and explains that "Christ is meant by this [animal], and the horn denotes Christ's cross" (5, P.17). Saint Basil (about 330 - 379), one of the great fathers of the eastern church, develops the symbolism even more. He says that Christ "will be called the Son of unicorns, for as we have learned in job, the unicorn is irresistible in might and unsuspected by man". He notes that the horn is frequently used in the Scriptures to denote glory and power and salvation, and adds : "Christ is the power of God, therefore he is called the unicorn on the grounds that he has one horn, that is, one common power with the Father" (5, P.17).

By interpreting the unicorn as a christian Symbol, the early theologians made possible the acceptance of him by learned christians. However, an anonymous writer who collected and recorded a group of animal legends sometime between the second and fourth centuries brought the unicorn an even greater and more



universal popularity. This book, originally written in Greek, was known as the Physiologus since in each chapter Physiologus (the Scientist) is cited as the source. The text consists of descriptions, many of them fanciful of real animals, birds, and fish, and even more fanciful descriptions of unreal creatures such as the centaur, who has the body of a horse but from the belly upwards it is like a man, the manticore, with a face of a man, a body of a lion and with its tail it can sting like a scorpion, and, the unicorn. Each account concludes with the lesson to be learned by christians from the supposed habits and characteristics of the animals described.

The 'Physiologus' was so admired and enjoyed in the middle ages that it exists today in countless versions. As time went on, many creatures were added to the 'Physiologus' of the early centuries, and by the twelfth century, the enlarged versions were generally known in western Europe as bestiaries. The physiologus attributes even more magical powers to the unicorn, saying that where a snake comes and casts poison in a large lake where animals go to drink, the animals do not dare drink and wait for the unicorn to come and make the sign of the cross with its horn, rendering the







poison harmless. Then the animals drink safely.  
Again he is a christian symbol.

Illustrations of the unicorn appear frequently in manuscripts of the Bible, and especially in the Psalter, the arrangement of the Psalms for liturgical use (5, P.37). The unicorn is featured in an early Psalter in Stuttgart dated about 820 (5, P.37). Psalm 22, a song of lament, that was interpreted as prophetic of Christs passion is illustrated with a crucifixion attended by a unicorn and a lion (fig. 14). The presence of these beast is explained in verse 21: "save me from the lions mount.....and from the horns of the unicorn" (5, P.38). The unicorn is frequently shown with other animals in Old Testament scenes, although the text does not specifically mention him. It must be taken for granted that when God created the birds in the sky and the beasts on the land, he also created the unicorn, because in a creation scene in the Queen Mary Psalter of the early fourteenth century, the unicorn appears with other animals, and he is placed close to the throne of God (5, P.39). On another page of this







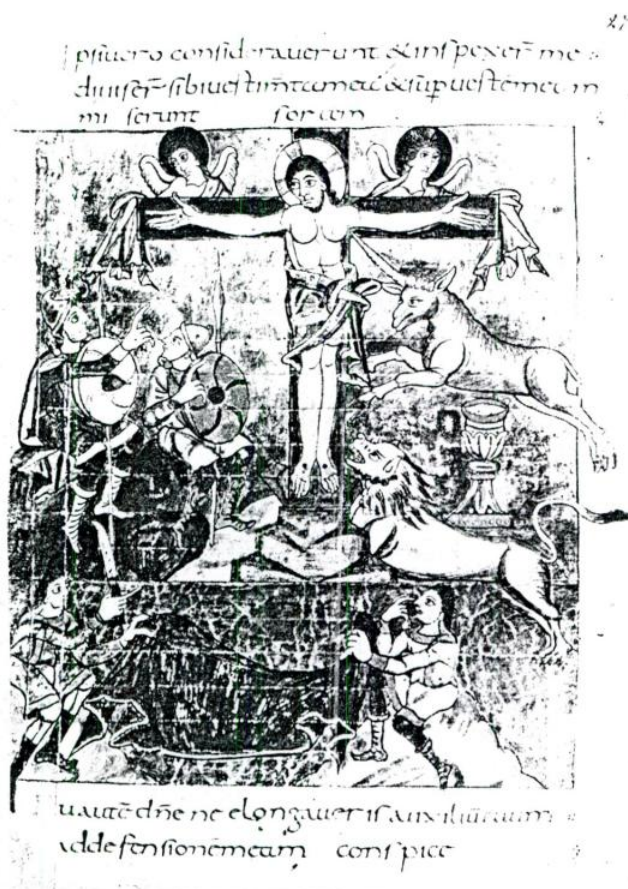


Fig. 14

Miniature in Stuttgart Psalter.  
 About 820.



manuscript Noah carries one of his sons into the ark whilst the birds, the unicorn and other beasts await their turn to go aboard (fig. 15).

Along with his close connections with christianity, the unicorn is frequently seen as an emblem of chastity and also as a heraldic device, the latter being more associated with women. The association of the unicorn with chastity was so close that it seems when a lady is accompanied by a unicorn, it more than likely indicates that she is chaste. The virtue named chastity is frequently shown with a unicorn as one of her emblems. In a fifteenth century German tapestry illustrating the war between the virtues and the vices, Chastity bears on her banner the device of a unicorn in the lap of a maiden (5, P.57). She appears rather formidable as she confronts Lust, and even more formidable woman, mounted on a bear. In representation of the Triumph of Chastity, unicorns regularly draw the victory chariot. In a fifteenth century Italian manuscript of the Triunfi, (5, P.57) an allegorical work of Francesco Petrarch, treating in turn of the triumph of Love, then of Chastity, Death, Fame, Time, and finally Divinity, the role of the unicorn in relation to Chastity is greatly expanded. A



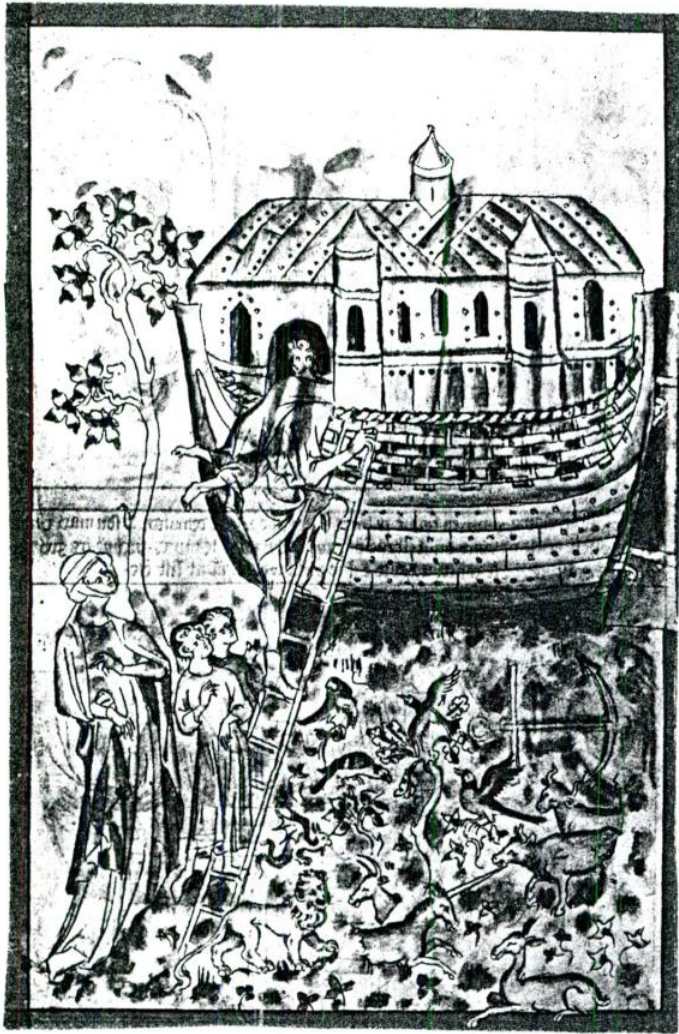


Fig. 15

Miniatures in Queen Mary's Psalter.  
Early 14th century.







team of unicorns not only draws her chariot but as she passed by, another unicorn dips his horn into a stream to purify it, and on the hillside a fourth unicorn, pursued by hounds, is tamed by a virgin maid (fig. 16).

If a set of tapestries was intended for a marriage or was made to celebrate a wedding anniversary, as the Cloisters tapestries depicting the Hunt of the Unicorn may have been, the unicorn as an emblem of Chastity would have been an obviously appropriate symbol. (see chapter 2 on history of tapestries).

The unicorn is also described and used as a heraldic device since he possesses all the qualities of an ideal medieval knight. He could fight fiercely and courageously against his enemies, and win; he could show compassion towards his fellow creatures; and he could submit completely to his lady as was required by the laws of courtly love. The unicorn is the sole supporter of the coat of arms on the gold coins of James III of Scotland, about 1480. On these, the unicorn is represented with a crown around his neck to which a chain is attached (5, P.61). A Flemish book of hours made for James IV about 1505 shows on one of its pages two unicorns supporting the Royal arms (fig. 17).



Fig. 16

Miniature in Trionfi of Petrarch,  
The Triumph of Chastity, Italian,  
15th Century.



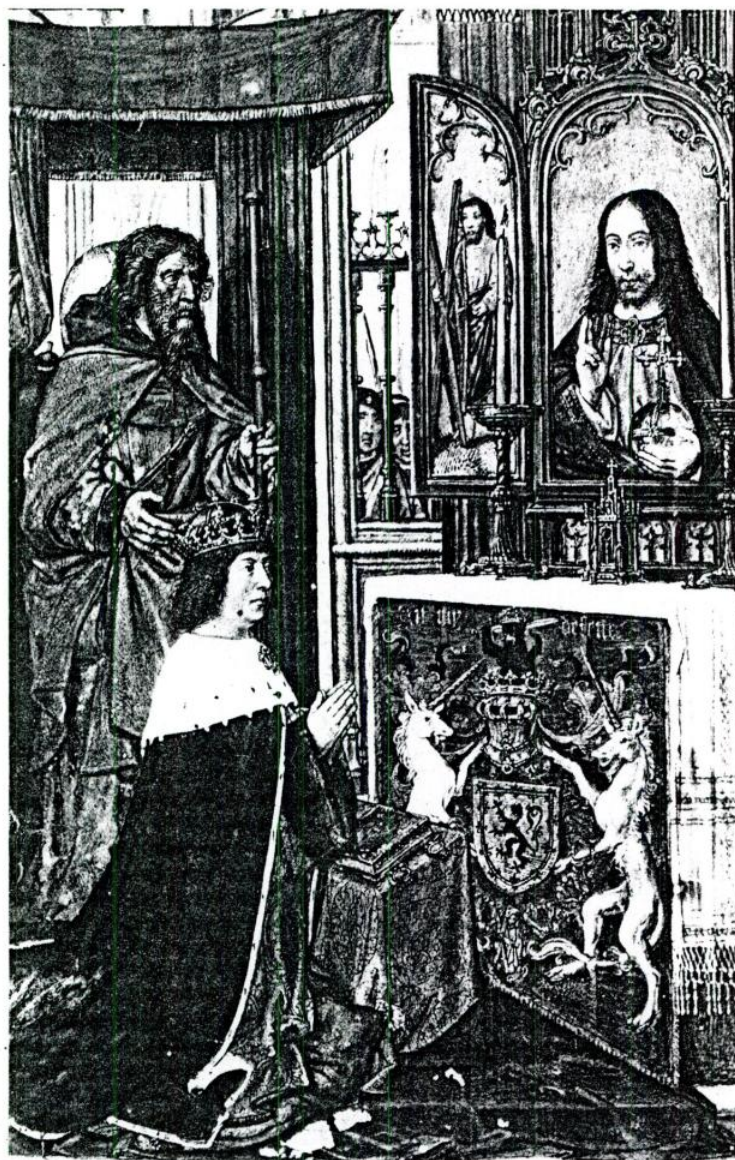


Fig.17 King James in Prayer, Book of Hours of King James IV of Scotland. Flemish about 1505.







They appear to be embroidered on the altar frontal in the Chapel where the King kneels in prayer. The unicorn was taken over as one of the supporters of the Royal arms of England when the Scottish King James I in 1603 (5, P.61).

His associations with christianity can be seen in the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries woven about 1500, where he appears to be symbolic of Christ, and the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries, woven about 1484, probably the most famous of heraldic unicorns, where he is supporting the banner of the Le Viste family for whom the tapestries were woven (see chapter 2 on history of tapestries). The symbolic meaning of the unicorn in these two sets of tapestries, the Hunt of the Unicorn and the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries, will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

CHAPTER 2 - The History of the Hunt of the Unicorn  
and the Lady with the Unicorn Tapestries.

The history of both sets of tapestries is uncertain. But, however, some theories have been put forward about their origin which will be discussed throughout this chapter and by studying these theories as well as studying the tapestries, their characteristics and the different characteristics of the various workshops of the time in about 1500, a conclusion can be reached.

Several writers have assumed that the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries, which will be examined first, were produced somewhere in France; others have suggested Tournai, Bruges and Brussels. I would consider that the most probable workshop was one of the many establishments in Brussels. For many years it was believed that Verdure tapestries, especially those with millefleurs backgrounds, which are discussed in detail further on in this chapter, were woven in France because they seemed to be in the best tradition of French taste. But as Weigert states in his book, French Tapestry (2, P.25), there is no evidence of any weaving establishment in France producing tapestries



during the major part of the fifteenth century, around when the tapestries are supposed to have been woven. It was thought that many tapestries in the French chateaux were woven by itinerant workers who had no fixed centres for their workshops but who travelled from place to place as orders came in and set up their looms and other equipment on the spot where the tapestries were to hang. This was accepted by many writers on the subject but there is, however, documentary evidence (4, P.77) that flemish ateliers, notably those in Brussels, were weaving verdures and millefleurs hangings in the fifteenth century. For example, in 1466, Philip the Good paid "Jehan the Haze, tapestry worker living in Brussels.....for eight pieces of verdure tapestries.....worked in gold, silver, and silk and fine woollen threads" (4, P.77).

Tournai may be ruled out, for the tapestries produced by Tournai weavers in the late fifteenth century are much less refined than the Hunt\_of\_the Unicorn tapestries. These tapestries are of a finer textured quality, this being characteristic of millefleurs, discussed in more detail in the section of this chapter dealing with the Lady\_with\_the\_Unicorn tapestries. The possibility that the Hunt\_of\_the

Unicorn tapestries were woven in Bruges is also remote. The only existing hangings known to have been produced in Bruges at this period are those depicting the story of Saint Anatoile (fig. 18), woven in the workshop of Jean de Wilde, and dated 1501 - 06. They are also coarse, displaying none of the finesse of the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries visible throughout the series.

Therefore, France, Tournai and Bruges could be ruled out and attention turns to Brussels. In Brussels there were any number of tapestry workshops turning out hundreds of hangings of the highest quality, certainly capable of producing such accomplished works as the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries (3, P.121). Examples of such are the Redemption tapestry in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and the Glorification of Charles VIII, at the Cloisters, both of which bear the signature of the Brussels designer Jan Van Roome. The problem is, however, that none of these seem to bear many similarities in design to the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries. By looking at exactly what was happening with tapestry making in Brussels at that time, it is possible to investigate into how what was going on there could perhaps be related to the weaving of the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries.





Fig. 18

Tapestry : one of the St. Anatoile de Salins set. Bruges, workshop of Jean de Wilde, 1501-06.







At the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century, there was a combination of characteristics apparent in the tapestries being made in Brussels. There was a relative lack of perspective, a preference for architecture and indoor scenes, a depiction of wild bushes growing on both sides of the tapestry, flower and foliage motifs, and also a depiction of high rows of trees, mountain tops, and buildings which reach almost to the top of the tapestry, leaving room only for a narrow band of sky and scrolls with inscriptions that might be included. Only few of these characteristics are not visible in the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries, such as the tapestries not being indoor scenes and there being very little architecture in the series. But the majority of the characteristics are easily seen; the relative lack of perspective, the flowers and foliage motifs and the narrow band of sky are all obvious in the tapestries.

Another factor worth noting about tapestry making in Brussels at that time is that about fifteen years after the probable date of the Unicorn tapestries, the Brussels atelier of Peter Van Aelst was engaged in weaving scenes from the Acts of the Apostles after

cartoons by Raphael (5, P.213). That these tapestries are completely different from such typical Brussels tapestries of that time (fig. 19), along with the factors mentioned above, brings one to believe that the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries were woven in Brussels.

The history of the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries is more vague. We know they were commissioned by Jean Le Viste as they bear the arms of the Le Viste family, a family which had its origins in Lyons; that they were executed between 1484, when Jean Le Viste gained the right to bear the full arms of his family after his father's death, and 1500, the date of his own death. Whether they were executed when he became head of his family, or when he was appointed President of the Court of Aids in 1489, if either, it is hard to know (4, P.66). But it is easy to imagine the pride Jean Le Viste took in his promotion which advertised to the world the ascension of the Le Vistes to the Royal Administration. But whereabouts was the workshop in which the Lady with the Unicorn was woven? Many theories have been put forward concerning their origin, but before discussing these theories, the type of tapestries that they are, known as 'millefleurs' (thousand flowers) should be examined.









Fig. 19

Cartoon by Raphael for Acts of the Apostles series,  
1515-16.





G.F.Wingfield Digby comments in his book The Tapestry Collection, on the considerable controversy over the origins and centres of production of millefleurs tapestries. The expression millefleurs, as Wingfield Digby discusses, (is a modern coinage to distinguish the medieval verdure from later types; millefleurs tapestries have the ground bestrewn all over with flowering plants on which figures (or heraldic devices) are set) (12, P.27). Digby considers the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries to be the undisputed "chef-d'oeuvre" among the millefleurs of superior quality. Two of the seven Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries in the Cloisters are verdure of the highest quality also, but the others in the set not quite in that finest quality verdure category.

The oldest theories on the production of these verdure, such as the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries, was put forward by R.A. Weigert in his book French Tapestry where he suggests that the verdure tapestries were largely the work of itinerant weavers travelling in the Loire district going from chateau to chateau according to orders received (12, P.25), as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. But Digby in his book goes on to say how a S. Schneebalg-Perelman had



made an extensive study of the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries since Weigerts suggestions (13, P.27). Schneebalg-Perelman suggests that Jean de Haze of Brussels supplied the Duke of Burgundy with the finest quality tapestries, of which an extant example is the famous armorial of Philip the Good (fig. 20) at the Historiches Museum, Berne, one of the eight tapestries purchased in 1466. The economic state of Brussels at the time does coincide with what Schneebalg-Perelman says. There was a decline in the cloth industry in the Burgundian Netherlands at the beginning of the fourteenth century which left thousands unemployed. The Dukes of Burgundy were anxious to use, for the benefit of their states, the abundant capital, qualified manpower and the expert dyers available, and it was they who encouraged and supported an inevitable change. This took the form of tapestry, the technique of which was not unlike that of cloth-making.

Whether this had anything to do with the making of such verdure tapestries as the Lady with the Unicorn is difficult to say (3, P.121). But with the oldest theories by R.A.Weigert in his book French Tapestries being contradicted by Schneebalg-Perelman after having made extensive study of the origin of the Lady with the

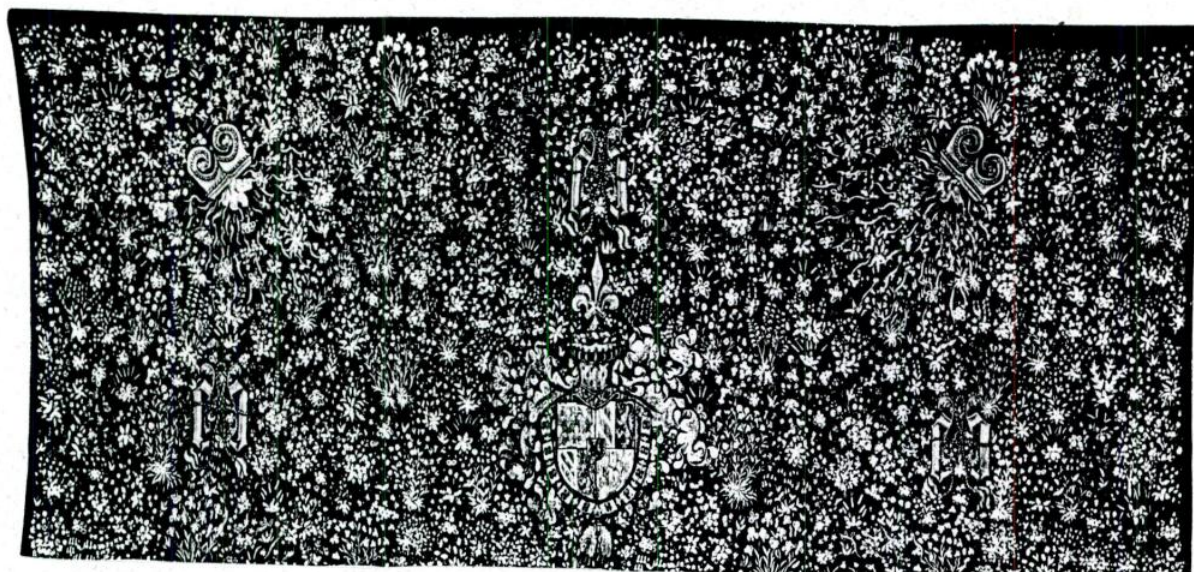


Fig. 20

Millefleurs tapestry with Arms and devices of Philip the Good. Brussels, 1466.





Unicorn tapestries (already discussed in this Chapter)  
the controversy over these origins and centres of  
production of these millefleurs still remains.



Chapter 3 - The Symbolism of the unicorn in the Hunt of the Unicorn and the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries.

The symbolism of the unicorn in the Hunt of the Unicorn and the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries is examined in this chapter. What he symbolises in both sets of tapestries, one being secular and the other being religious, appears to be quite different. This is strange considering the tapestries were both supposedly woven around the late fifteenth, early sixteenth century (see P. 17 in chapter on history of the tapestries).

First, to look at the role of the unicorn in the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries (figs. 1-7), on permanent exhibition at the Cloister Museum in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. This set consists of seven tapestries. In the first, (fig. 1) gaily dressed huntsmen with feathers in their hats spears in their hands and their dogs on leashes, pause for a moment and are beckoned by another, indicating that the unicorn has been sighted. In the second, (fig. 2) the huntsmen come upon the unicorn beside a small stream, with animals waiting while the unicorn dips his horn into the water to purify it of poison so

thay they can drink safely. The third tapestry sees the hunt in full cry (fig. 3). Dogs are unleashed and spears are thrown but the unicorn leaps the stream and in the fourth tapestry (fig. 4) fights back, kicking out at the huntsmen and the dogs. The huntsmen, in the fifth tapestry (fig. 5), having failed to kill the unicorn using spears and dogs, try to tame the unicorn using a maiden. The unicorn approaches the maiden as she places her hand on his mane. The sixth tapestry (fig. 6) shows the death of the unicorn. He is killed by the hunters and is brought back to the castle on the back of a horse. But in the seventh tapestry, he is shown alive again, quite happily in an enclosure tied to a tree (fig. 7).

So the first appearance of the unicorn is in the second tapestry where he has dipped his horn into the water (fig. 21). The symbolism of this action appears to be taken from a paragraph in a Greek Physiologus (5, P.27);





Fig. 21

The Unicorn rids the stream of poison in the second tapestry of the Hunt of the Unicorn series.







But before they are assembled the serpent comes and casts its poison into the water. now the animals mark well the poison and do not dare to drink and they wait for the unicorn. It comes and immediately goes into the lake and making with his horn the sign of the cross renders the power of the poison harmless and all the other animals drink as well (5, P.27).

Though the text does not explain the significance of the paragraph, it is not hard to see. The serpent is the device who brought the poison of sin into the world, and the unicorn, who purified the water from poison with his horn is symbolic of Christ who redeemed the world from sin. This explains the unicorn as a symbol of Christ, which is common to all the tapestries of the series in which the unicorn appears. In the third and fourth tapestries where the huntsmen try to kill the unicorn but he leaps the stream and fights back, his fearlessness and bravery exemplify the invincibility of Christ. "They say that he is exceedingly fierce, and this means that neither Principalities nor Powers nor thrones.....not the most subtle devil nor hell could hold [him] against his will" (5, P.17).

In the fifth tapestry the only way to capture the unicorn is illustrated:

"Our Lord Jesus Christ, the spiritual unicorn, descended into the womb of the virgin and through her on human flesh.....only by the wish of the father" (5, P.19)

And so too was the unicorn captured only by means of the taming influence of a maiden (fig. 22), almost surrendering himself and so making it his own choice. The religious symbolism is continued in the sixth tapestry where the dead unicorn has a wreath of oak leaves around his neck which could very easily be seen to refer to Christ's crown of thorns as he carried his cross. And in the final tapestry the symbolism is quite clear: as Christ rose on the third day from the dead with wounds in his sides and in his hands and feet, the unicorn too is alive once again with his wounds from the hunters, but looks content as though this is how it was meant to be (fig. 23).

This religious symbolism of the unicorn with his concern for his fellow creatures, his crown of oak leaves and his rising from the dead is quite obvious throughout the series of the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries and although it is somewhat less easy to





Fig. 22

The Maiden who tames the Unicorn in the fifth tapestry of the Hunt of the Unicorn series.







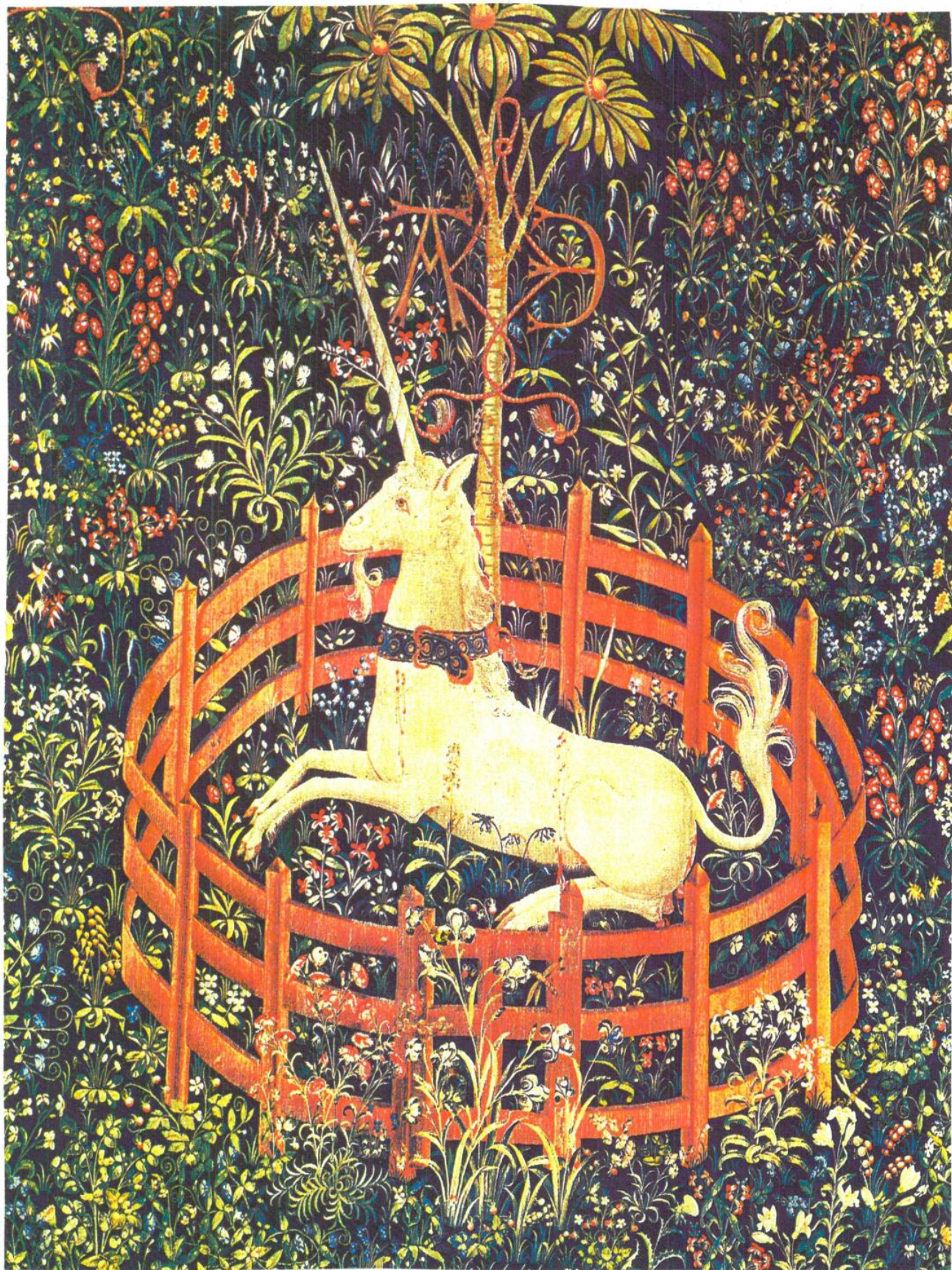


Fig. 23 Unicorn in Captivity. Final tapestry of the Hunt of the Unicorn series.







explain, there is also a secular symbolism to be found, especially in the final tapestry of the series which could be interpreted as an allegory of true love. In it the unicorn is collared, chained to a tree and surrounded by a fence (fig. 23). This situation could be compared to one where a person is so madly in love that one could describe them as being captured or enthralled by love, as was the unicorn chained and imprisoned. The secular symbolism seen here is not obvious in the other five tapestries, but perhaps is portrayed by a worldly atmosphere through the elaborate clothing: the maiden is richly gowned in what appears to be a brocaded red velvet-like fabric in the fifth tapestry and the huntsman in the third tapestry is wearing a long, wide-sleeved, brocaded jacket and a feather in his hat; also the decorative dog collars and weapons; in the sixth tapestry the young huntsman about to kill the unicorn with his spear also carries an elaborately decorated knightly sword. The castle in the sixth tapestry, portrayed as a group of buildings in multi-coloured stone work, adds to the atmosphere of worldliness (fig. 24).



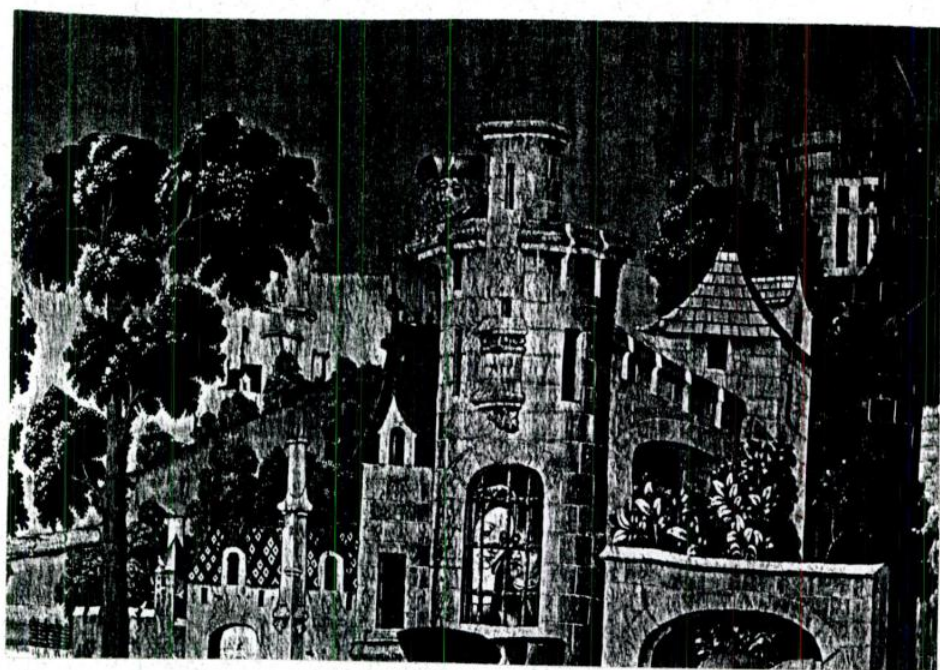


Fig. 24      The fancy castle in the sixth tapestry of the  
Hunt of the Unicorn series.





Therefore, it appears that the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries was intended to convey both religious and secular significance, the unicorn symbolising both the risen Christ and also the lover held captive, but much more obvious and easy to understand, in my opinion, is the former.

The Lady with the Unicorn tapestries (figs. 8-13), on the otherhand, are clearly of a secular nature and certainly portray none of that religious symbolism that is vividly seen in the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries. Looking closely at the Lady with the Unicorn series, consisting of six tapestries, one can recognise that five of the six tapestries are allegories of the senses and these are easily explicable,

Sight : the unicorn is watching himself in a looking glass held out to him by the Lady. (fig. 8)

Hearing : she is playing a portable organ worked by her servant. (fig. 9)

Smell : a monkey perched on a stool is sniffing at a carnation while the Lady weaves a wreath of flowers. (fig. 10)

Taste : a monkey raises a sweetmeat to its mouth, while the young woman chooses another from the comfit-dish. (fig. 11)

Touch : here she is shown holding the unicorns horn very gently in her hand. (fig. 12)

There remains the last tapestry, with the inscription A mon seul desir, where the Lady is putting back the necklace (which she is wearing in the other five tapestries) into a casket held out (fig. 13). 'free will' if Socrates and Plato's philosophical definition is used (4, P.68) meant that though it is thought to be proper to behave correctly we do not since because of our senses we become slaves to our passions. And in view of these words and the Ladys actions, the tapestries symbolise the renunciation of the passions aroused by our senses when they are not under control. Therefore, it could be said that the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries reveal a moral meaning. But what does the unicorn itself reveal?

Examining the symbolism of the unicorn in the tapestries, it appears to be one of the heraldry. For in all the tapestries except the one representing sight, the unicorn's role is to support the banner or shield of the Le Viste family, for whom the set was



woven (see chapter on history of the tapestries). As a heraldic device he is said to possess the qualities of an ideal medieval knight, 'he could fight fiercely and courageously against his foes and win' (4, P.68).

Though the unicorn appears to be employed as a heraldic device in the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries as he stands guard with the lion, he is not portrayed as being fierce and wild, but tame as he supports the Le Viste banner with his face being friendly and shy (fig. 25 ), his medieval knightly qualities do not seem obvious in his appearance. In the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries the unicorn also seems to be symbolising one thing but his appearance does not necessarily seem to match that symbolism. On looking at the Hunt of the Unicorn series as a whole, one can see his christian qualities described in the first part of this chapter, but on examining the actual appearance of the unicorn especially in the fourth tapestry (fig. 26) where he gores a hound and kicks out with his hooves, he is more a medieval knight than Christ the Lord. This wildness and fierceness of the unicorn, seen in the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries, does not appear to be exploited by





Fig. 25 The shy face of the Unicorn in the fifth tapestry of the Lady with the Unicorn series.



Fig. 26 The Unicorn showing move of a violent manner in the fourth tapestry of the Hunt of the Unicorn series.





the medieval artist of the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries.

Other heraldic unicorns can be found in the Cloisters of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, where the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries are on permanent exhibition. Three unicorns are carved on an early-sixteenth century French doorway from Montferrand where two of them support unidentified coats of arms and the third forms a crest between the two others. The dwelling from which this doorway came was known to the citizens of Montferrand as the House of Unicorns (fig. 27).

As the elaborate clothing and jewels of the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries adds to the atmosphere of worldliness, as discussed earlier in this chapter, this indication of wealth can also be seen in the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries, where the Lady in the fifth tapestry in a blue-black robe, a gown of gold brocade on a dark blue foundation with her jewels enhancing this magnificent clothing, a metal belt which has a long chain and a necklace composed of rings and



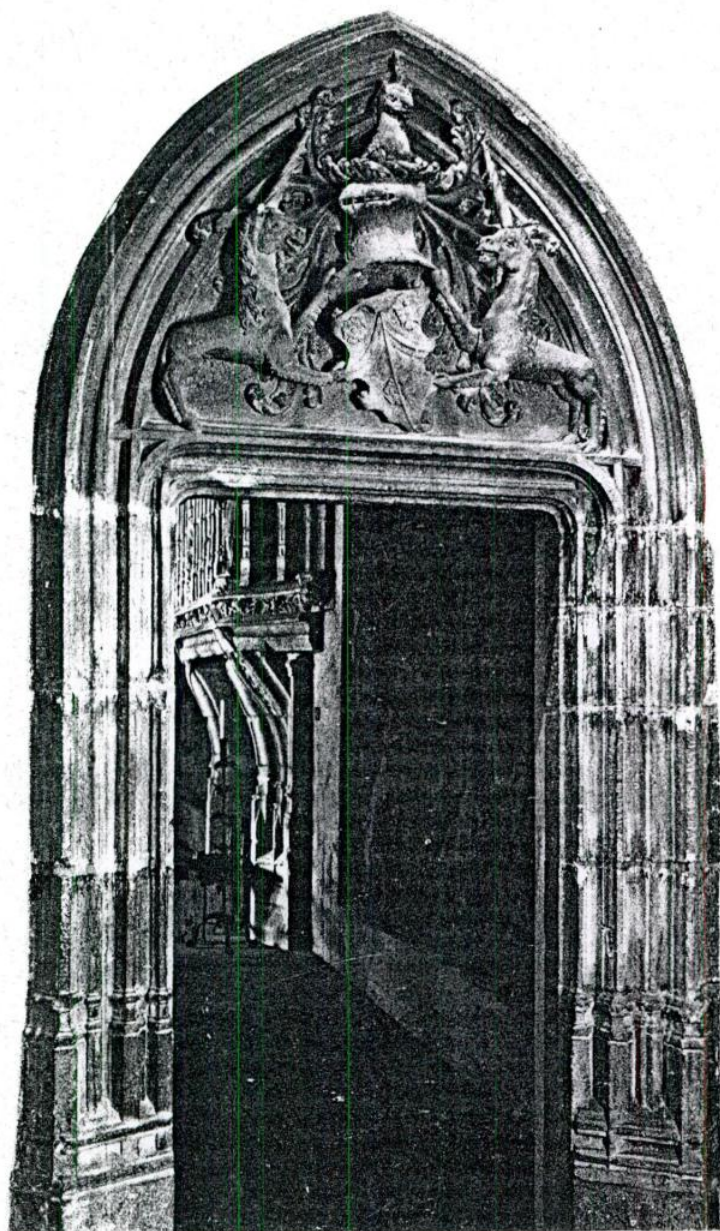


Fig. 27 Doorway from Montferrand, French, early 16th century.

dangling pendants (figs. 28+29). This atmosphere of wealth and plenty, in my opinion, enhances the symbolism of the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries, a symbolism which is of a secular nature.

Though these tapestries, the Hunt of the Unicorn and the Lady with the Unicorn may not be closely linked in a symbolic virtues, they can be credited with similar qualities of enchantment and magic, the unicorn being surrounded by a certain aura of mystery in both sets of tapestries.



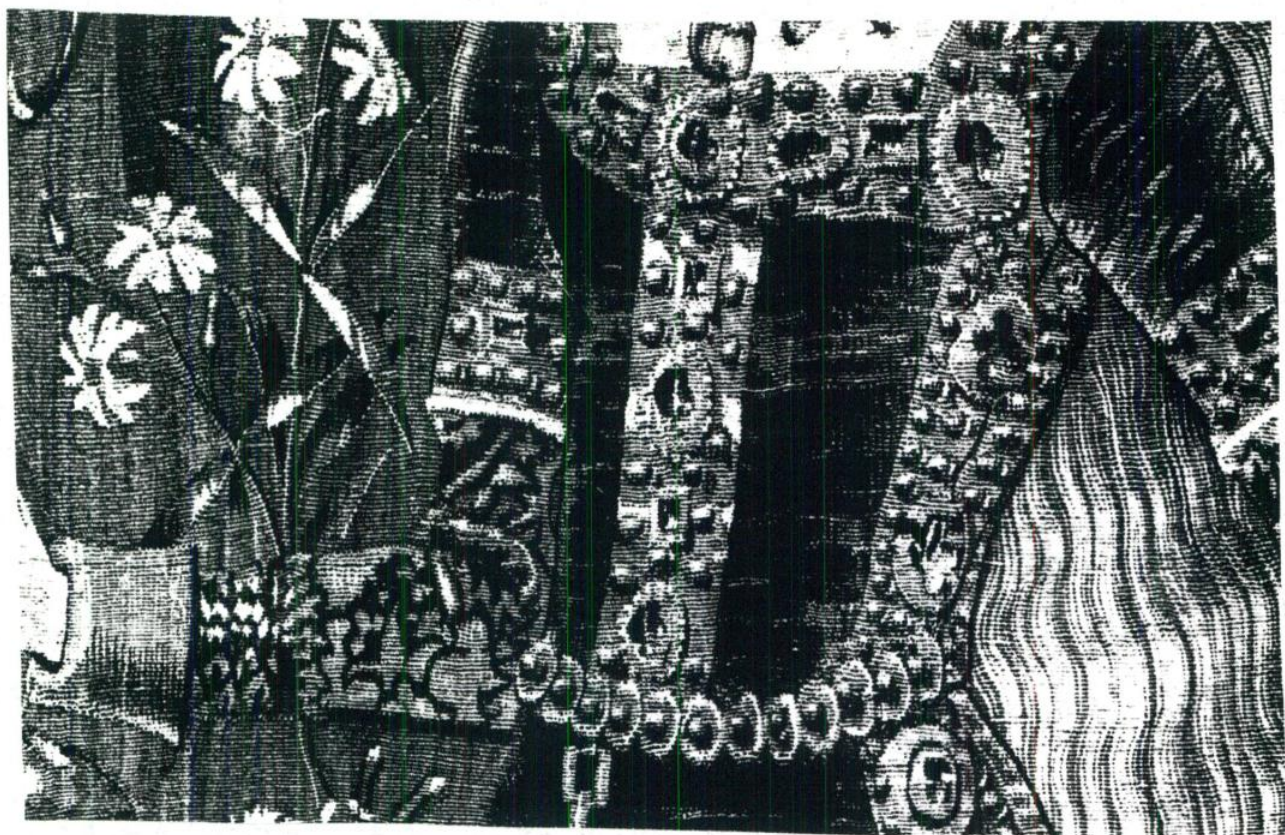


Fig. 28 A metal belt with long chain composed of rings and dangling pendants. Fifth tapestry of the Hunt of the Unicorn series.

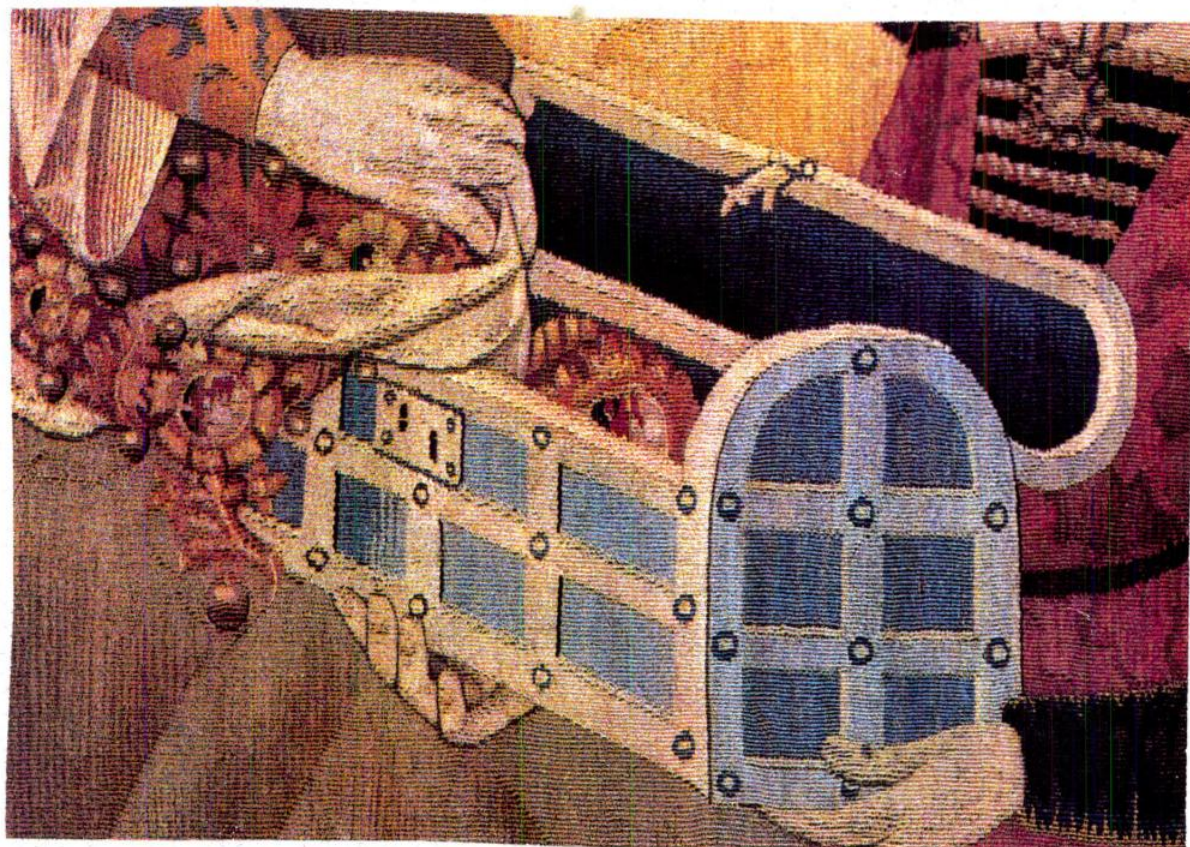


Fig. 29 The Lady puts the elaborate necklace into the large jewellery box. Final tapestry in the Lady with the Unicorn series.







Chapter 4 - The making of the Unicorn tapestries in comparison to the making of a contemporary tapestry. The Unicorn today; where can he be found.

Margaret B. Freeman in her book, The Unicorn Tapestries (5, P.209) gives an account of the looms and weaving of the medieval weavers. She talks of the Unicorn tapestries as good examples of typical medieval weaving techniques. The warp being of threads of undyed wool, tightly twisted and very strong, are covered completely by the finer weft threads that form the designs. The warp threads are only visible as ribs (fig. 30). As for the weft threads, each colour is passed back and forth in the area where the cartoon requires that colour. Where one colour stops and turns back on itself, and another starts, doing the same thing in the opposite direction, a slit occurs (fig. 31). Slits are not always a problem; tiny slits that produce small holes are used intentionally and effectively in the tapestries to outline, for instance, lines on the faces and hands of the people and on the animals heads and bodies. In the Unicorn tapestries unintentional slits were avoided by dovetailing or interlacing of the weft. For dovetailing, at the point where one colour ends and another begins, wefts of the first and second colour pass around the same warp of



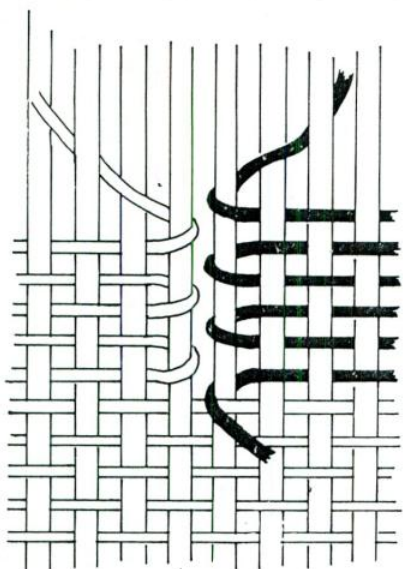


Fig. 31

Formation of a slit.

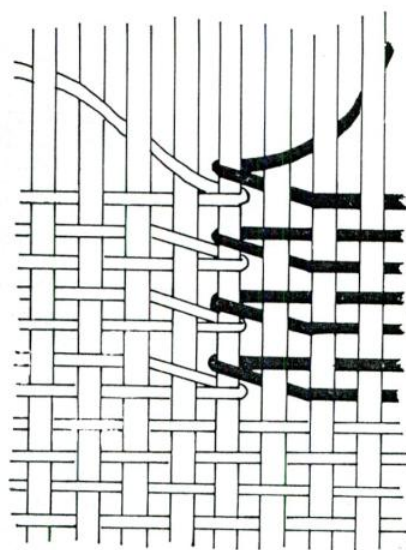


Fig. 32

Dovetailing.

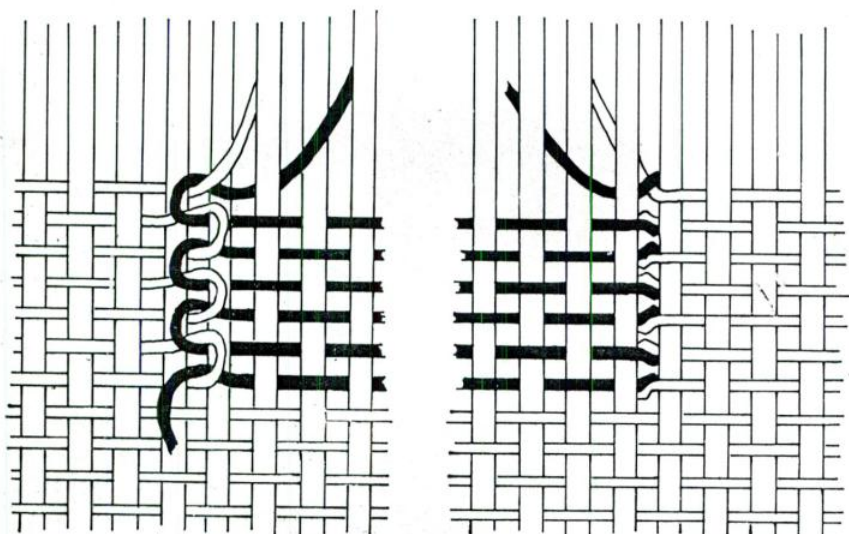


Fig. 33

Interlocking (back and face)





thread (fig. 32). A more complicated method of avoiding slits is by interlocking a linking of the weft threads of the two adjoining colours (fig. 33). The joining is invisible from the front and the fabric remains strong throughout. This technique is used frequently in both sets of tapestries.

The shading from light to dark in the Unicorn tapestries is achieved mainly by hatchings, that is, strokes of lighter-coloured areas and vice-versa. Half-tones result where the hatchings adjoin. Hatchings are quite time-consuming to do and quicker results are obtained with solid patches of light colour woven beside patches of dark. The difference between this method and the hatching is clear when one compares a violet in the first tapestry of the Hunt\_\_of\_\_the Unicorn series with a violet in the sixth tapestry of the set (fig. 34). The weft threads of the Unicorn tapestries are predominantly of wool. Silk threads are used also, especially for highlights, their shining quality being very effective. All the colours were achieved by means of three vegetable dyestuffs, "madder (Rubia\_\_tinctorum) for the reds, weld (Keseda\_luteola) for the yellows and woad (Isatis\_tinctoria) for the blues. This conclusion is based on the analysis of the



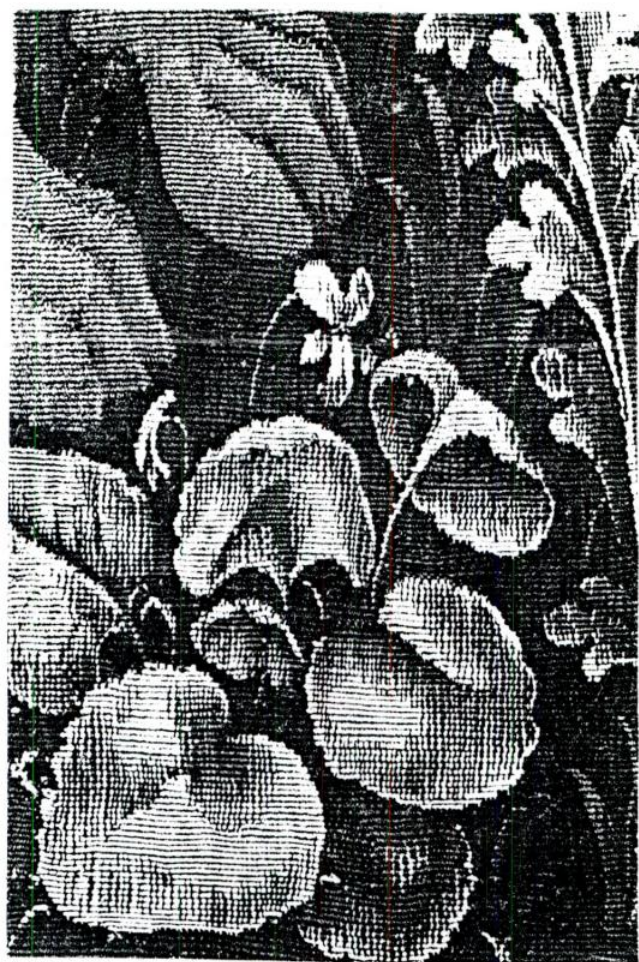
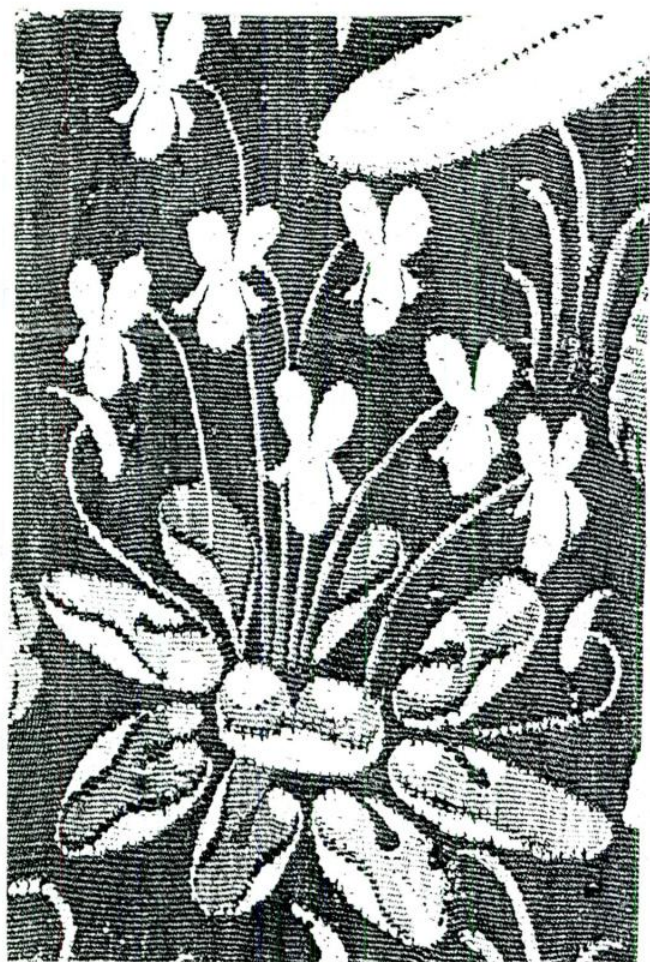


Fig. 34      Violet plant in first tapestry (left) and  
sixth (Hunt of the Unicorn tapestry series).





dyes of forty-seven samples of unattached threads snipped from the backs of all the tapestries" (5, P.211) With these three dyes, red, yellow and blue, other colours were achieved by combining two or three of the dyes.

It is interesting to examine this weaving discussed above, and the workshops of the medieval times in comparison to a contemporary tapestry weaver. The contemporary weaver I chose is Helena Hernmarck since her tapestries bear many similarities; being large-scale, the weft usually being predominantly wool, but also having many differences such as the medium of the warp threads, and the looms used.

Helena Hernmarck is Swedish and worked in England for 11 years before setting up her workshop in New York in 1971. She weaves extremely large-scale tapestries, some up to forty feet in length. Her subjects vary; some show animals, enormous flowers and outdoor scenes of forests and seas. She studied at the Swedish School of Art, Craft and Design from 1959 to 1963 and has held many one person exhibitions, including at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1973 and at Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1974 (2, P.262). Janet Kennedy, who is now an established tapestry weaver in San Francisco,



worked with Hernmarck for over nine years. Having talked with her and seen how she works in her own workshop in San Francisco, I gained a good insight into the workshop of Helena Hernmarck.

As R.A. Weigert states in French Tapestries, (12,P.25) the weavers guilds in France and Brussels in the late fifteenth, early sixteenth centuries were similar in their rules and requirements for admittance into workshops. To be admitted into these workshops as a master weaver, one had to be qualified as an expert in the weaving craft. Each master was then allowed one apprentice besides his legitimate children. The apprentices trained for three years and were required to work only three days a week. All weavers were forbidden to work in the morning before the bells sounded the arrival of the day, or in the evening after the last bells, and they were never allowed to weave by artificial light. They were also to observe all Sundays and Holy Days. As one might imagine, these regulations are not to be found in the contemporary workshop being examined, Hernmarck's, and though it may seem strange that any similarities in the tapestries, workshops or weaving can be made, there definitely are quite a few. As in the workshops of the late fifteenth

century, with their master weaver and apprentices, Helena Hernmarck is the master weaver with her apprentices, up to three working at a loom, such as Janet Kennedy. Hernmarck and her assistants work side by side at the loom, on large-scale tapestries usually working on ten foot or twelve foot looms. Her work, like the Unicorn tapestries, is large and when too large for the looms, she weaves them in two separate sections. The weavers weave keeping pace with one another, as did the medieval weavers, but to keep the tension correct and for consistency throughout the tapestry, the weavers in the workshop of Janet Kennedy, now master of her own workshop, alternate places every so often, as she had learned to do when apprentice to Helena Hernmarck. Whether any such changeover was done when weaving tapestries in the medieval workshops, is not referred to in any of the contemporary literature I used on medieval weaving.

One great difference between medieval weaving and that of both Hernmarck and Kennedy is the actual weave used. Plain weave was used in the Unicorn tapestries, as mentioned in the opening of this chapter, but in the work of the contemporaries being discussed, Soumak weaving is usually used. This Soumak weaving is worked



on a closed shed (fig. 35). The technical description of Soumak (7, P.30) is that starting from left with the shed closed, the pattern yarn is taken over four and back two warps until salvage is reached. The next pick is in plain weave in the binder yarn. The Soumak is then returned from right to left and the plain pick repeated. Janet Kennedy when weaving, although the principle is the same, uses a variation of this Soumak weaving. She starts with the pattern (or Soumak) weft, not weaving exactly over four warps and back two warps but weaving according to the cartoon. Perhaps she takes the pattern yarn over three or four and back maybe one warp, whatever is needed to enhance the image, emphasising edges, detailing faces or outlining. Then before and after the binder pick of cotton, she weaves a plain row with the same weft material as the Soumak row. Therefore, there is a continuing sequence of four rows; Soumak, plain, binder and plain. As in the weaving of Unicorn tapestries already discussed, Hernmarck and Kennedy use interlocking to avoid slits.

The materials used in medieval tapestry weaving, as Weigert discusses in French Tapestries, was predominantly wool (12, P.P.15+16) with warp threads of undyed wool, tightly twisted and very strong, covered

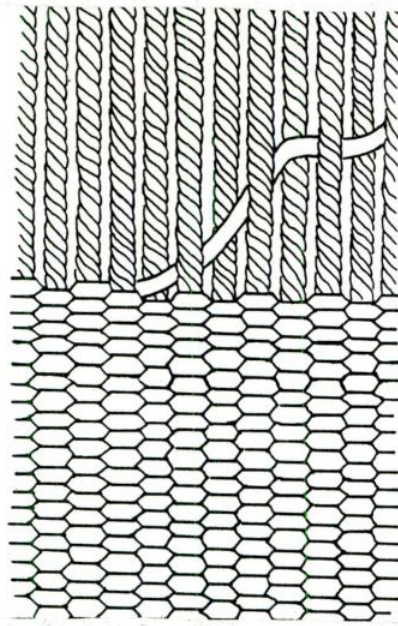


Fig. 30 Basic tapestry weave.

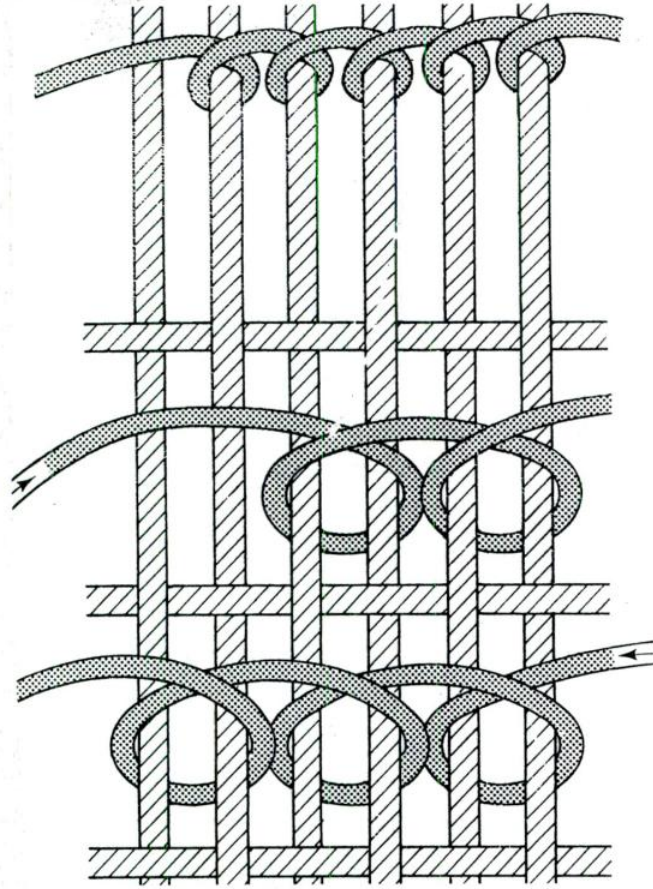


Fig. 35 Soumak weaving.





completely by the finer weft threads that form the design. These weft threads were mainly wool but sometimes silk and gold or silver threads were used for details requiring more refined execution for skies, horizons, for highlights on draperies, ornaments and flowers. Both Hernmarck and Kennedy use cotton for their warp, and wool is popular for both these weavers for the weft. Using both thick and thin wools in her weft, Hernmarck uses mainly Swedish wools. She uses strips of plastic as her weft in a tapestry, Carp (fig. 36) to give it a quality of transparency. Both Hernmarck and Kennedy also use linen in the weft as a binder pick, as discussed earlier in this chapter, but this linen is not visible when the thicker wefts of wool are beaten down.

Carp which is one of Hernmarck's earlier works in 1973, woven in a brocade technique, is a two-sided, semi-transparent hanging where the images on one side play against the shadow of the images of the reverse. Her use of perforated plastic strips to create this transparency is enhanced by the fact that the hanging is placed in a glass pavillion. Like Hernmarck's, Kennedy's tapestries serve as a purpose of decoration in lobbies of office and companies in such places as



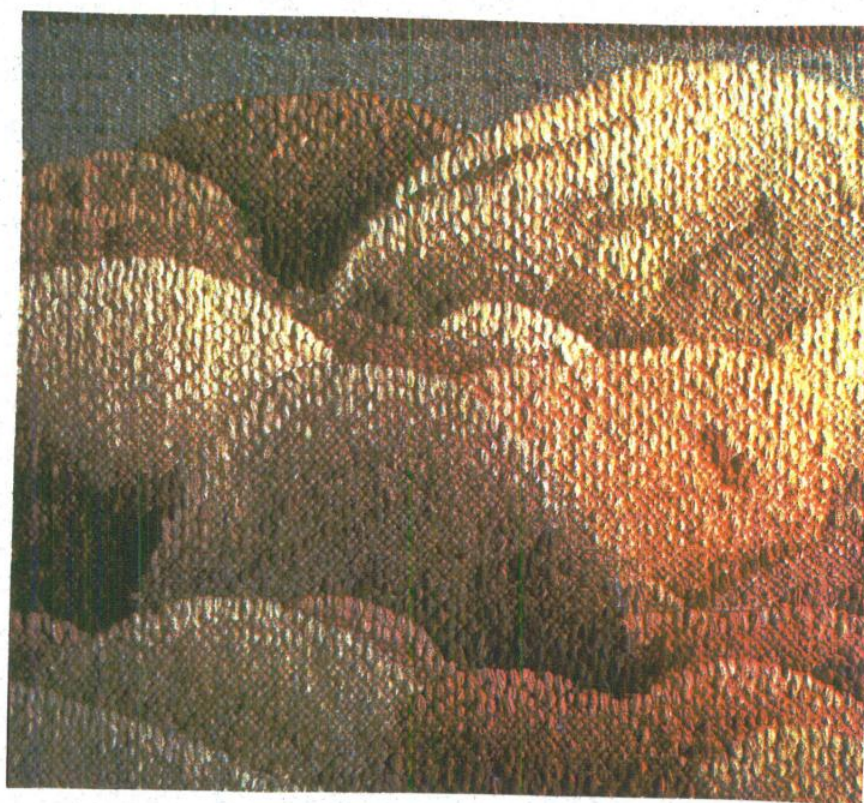
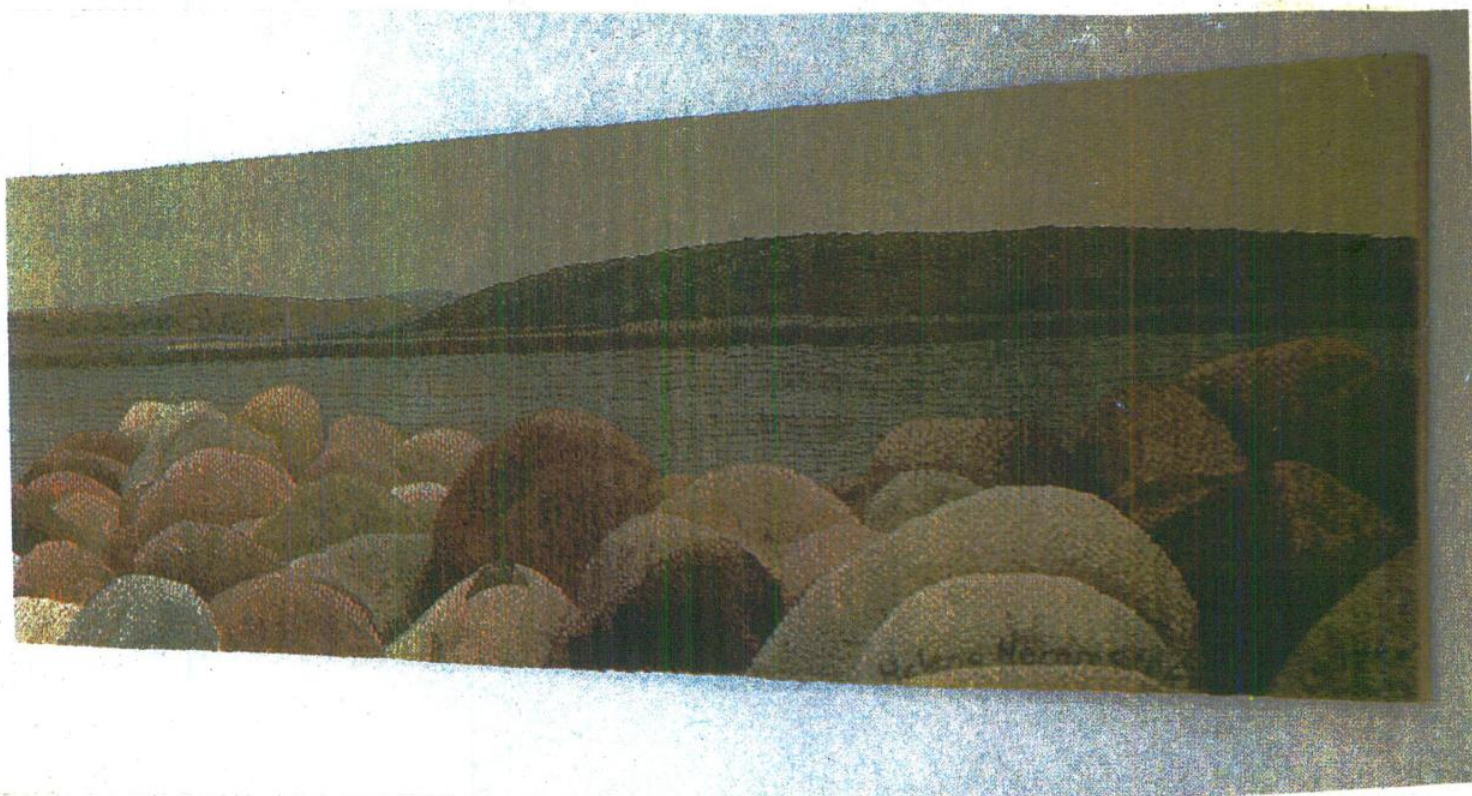


Fig. 36 Journey, Helena Hernmarck, wool, 1977  
Section (above) detail (below)



Wisconsin, Dallas, Chicago and San Francisco (fig. 37). But the Unicorn tapestries served as an effective insulation against cold in the royal and princely residences of the middle ages (13, P.P.33+34). This also served to form cosy compartments in large halls. Eventually bed hangings, seat covers, and even floor rugs were made to match the wall hangings. And from this use of matching tapestries arose the practice of weaving sets consisting of a number of hangings which depict the episodes of a story, as do the tapestry set of the Hunt of the Unicorn and the Lady with the Unicorn.







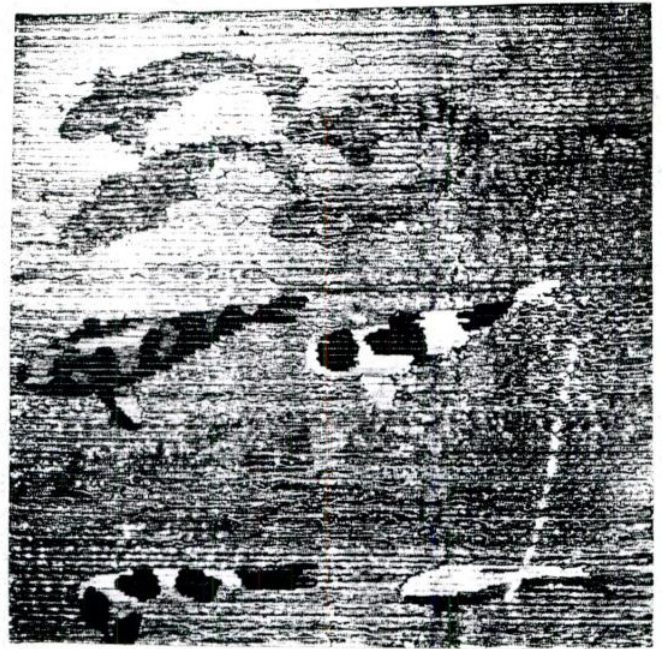
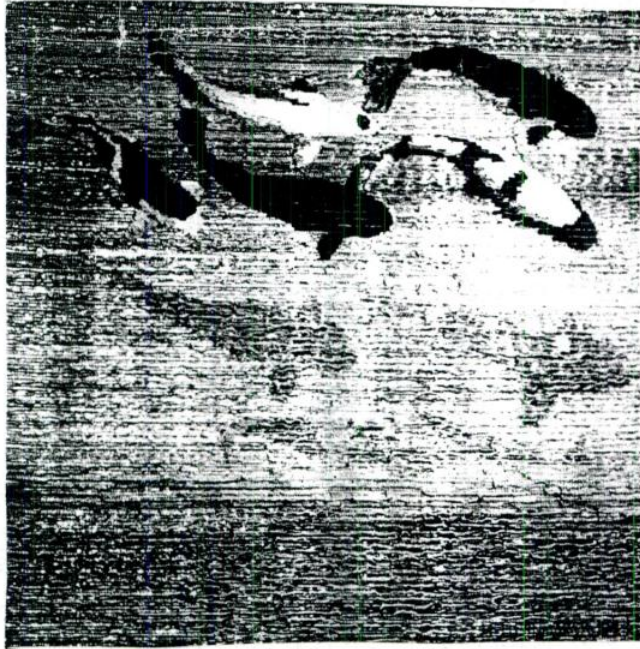


Fig. 37 Carp (front and back) brocade (two-sided);  
linen, perforated plastic strips, 1973.





- The unicorn today; where can he be found?

The making of the tapestries, the Hunt of the Unicorn and the Lady with the Unicorn can be related to tapestries which are made today, as we have already seen. But what about the subject of these medieval tapestries; is the unicorn and its symbolism relevant today?

The reaction, I found, from the majority of people to whom the unicorn was mentioned appeared to be 'Was there ever such an animal as the unicorn' or 'Did he really exist?' Though most did not seem to know much about the unicorn, they knew of him and related this fantastic one-horned creature to mystery, myth and magic. Finding it difficult to locate this mystery, myth and magic of the unicorn in contemporary art, other means such as his appearances in the movie world give us an idea of his whereabouts in today's world. In a 1987 film called The Glass Menagerie based on a Tennessee Williams' play about family relationships (14), the unicorn is compared to the daughter in the family who is extremely shy, not helped by the fact that she has polio and walks with an obvious limp. She



lives at home with her brother and mother who is eager to have her married. She dropped out of school, does not socialise, never mixing with anybody other than her family because of this over-whelming shyness. So she lives a lonely life with her collection of glass animals that her mother calls 'glass menagerie' as her only passion. Her favourite creature in her glass collection is the unicorn and he, being unique amongst the numerous glass horses and other animals, appears to be symbolic of her loneliness. When a friend of her brother comes to dinner, she appears to break out of her shyness beginning to talk freely to him, even dancing with him but as they dance they knock the glass Unicorn over and his horn breaks off. The symbolism is obvious here. The unicorn without his horn was now like the other horses; could she by overcoming this shyness be like others and learn to mix with people? She does not overcome it; the man, after kissing her and undoing the shyness even more, tells her of his fiancée and how he would not be calling again. With this she goes back into her shell, her shyness overwhelming her once again.

With the idea that there was only ever one unicorn, the film relates him to the loneliness of the

young woman, his horn symbolising her shyness. A film that does seem to treat the unicorn in a similar manner to the designers of the unicorn tapestries is a 1980 film, Legend (15), of fantasy where small mythical creatures live. The Unicorns (one male and one female) referred to as 'sacred animals' by the forest creatures, symbolise everything that is good, 'as long as they are on the earth, evil can never harm the pure of heart'. These unicorns in the film are magnificent white horses with horns attached to their foreheads, keep evil from the world. This symbolism is similar to that of the unicorn in the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries who, ready to rid the world of sin, is symbolic of Christ the Lord. And as the unicorn in the tapestry is killed, so too is the male unicorn in the film Legend. He is killed by the evil-doers who refer to the unicorns as 'ugly one-horned mules' with 'disgusting goodness'. They cut off his horn which is sacred, as was the unicorn's horn in medieval times, and misuse its magical powers. But like most mythical tales of good versus evil, good finally triumphs, bringing the unicorn back to life and the forest which became dark, ugly and eerie is restored to peacefulness and beauty. The fact that the unicorn is miraculously alive once again is like the unicorn of the final tapestries in the Hunt of the Unicorn series, who



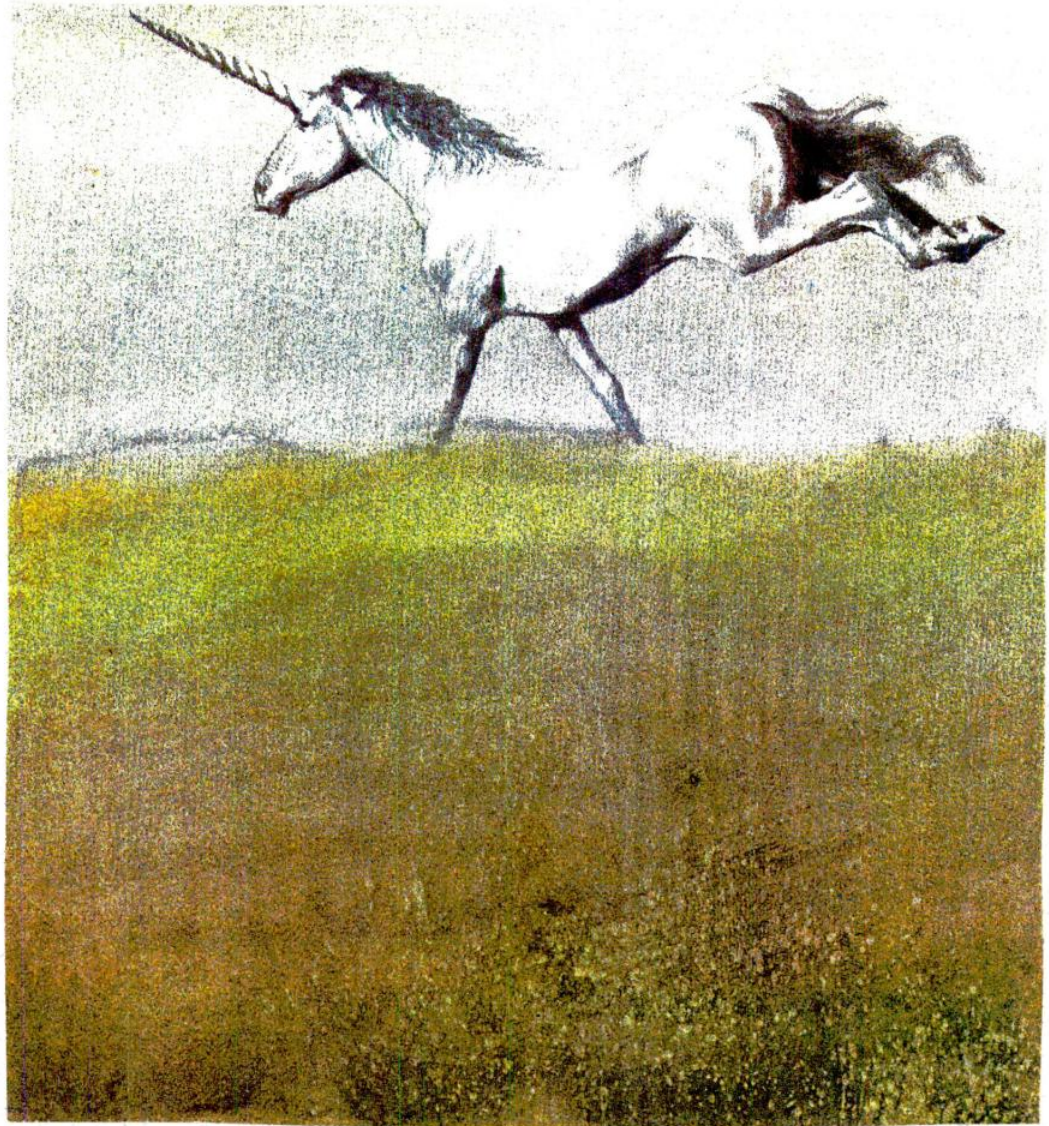


Fig. 38 The more common perception of the unicorn today with the body & head of a horse.







sits contented after being brutally killed in the sixth tapestry.

The Unicorn is alive today, still enchanting and mystifying but perhaps not to the same extent as he did in the middle ages.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined the appearances and various aspects of the symbolism of the unicorn in a historical context, discovering that his mystical qualities appear to have survived over the centuries and continue to survive to the present day. Though varied in appearance over the years, having had the head of a goat or the body of an antelope, the more common perception today is of him, still of male, with the body and head of a horse (fig. 38). The dominant distinguishing feature from the earliest reference I have found, about 193 A.D., up to today, is his long, sharp, twisted horn growing from the middle of his forehead.

As I wanted to concentrate on textiles I have focussed on the Hunt of the Unicorn and the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries. In my search for the sources of the mythology of the unicorn, I looked at biblical references, this lead me to illustrations from the Bible and the most recent aspect I could find was in film. I have studied this creature that seems never to have existed by looking at the myths and symbols that surround him. By comparing the symbolism of the unicorn in ancient times with that of



the Unicorn Tapestries of the late middle ages and also with the unicorn's present day image, I have decided that this creature's symbolism has a number of common characteristics.

The unicorn always appears to be symbolic of goodness; whether the symbolism is of a religious or secular nature, it seems to be related to purity and goodness. For instance, the unicorn in the Hunt of the Unicorn tapestries, with his power to purify the water and his sacred horn, is associated with goodness through his analogy with Christ. In the recent film Legend, the unicorn is not invested in any religious meaning but still symbolises everything that is good and while he is alive, evil cannot harm the world.

As well as relating the unicorn of times gone by to the unicorn of today, I have also compared the making of the Hunt of the Unicorn and the Lady with the Unicorn tapestries to a contemporary tapestry weaver's work, a comparison from which a number of similarities as well as dissimilarities are evident.

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