

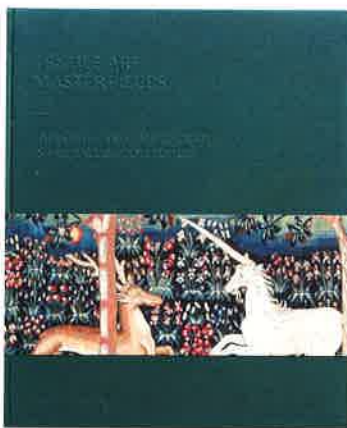
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Books



TEXTILE ART MASTERPIECES

*Tapestries and Embroideries
in the Zaleski Collection*

By Nello Forti Grazzini, Chiara Buss,
Gian Luca Bovenzi

Moshe Tabibnia, Milan 2014
Italian and English editions,
515 pp., colour & b/w illustrations,
technical notes, bibliography
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Reviewed by Guy Delmarcel

Since the early 1990s, Romain Zaleski and his wife H el ene de Prittwitz have collected European tapestries and embroideries in addition to their far-ranging collections of oriental carpets. The products of their quest are now illustrated and discussed in this impressive large-format catalogue, written by specialists Nello Forti Grazzini (tapestries), and Chiara Buss and Gian Luca Bovenzi (embroideries), and lavishly published by the Tabibnia gallery in Milan.

The focus of the Zaleski tapestry collection is on late medieval and early modern pieces from the main production centres of the time: the Upper and Lower Rhenish communities in Germany and Switzerland, as well as France and Flanders. The collectors' selection has been dictated in part by the dimensions of the textiles, favouring pieces that fit in contemporary apartments.

A large group of fragments with floral backgrounds, the so-called 'millefleurs' tapestries, are especially appropriate in this respect. They are grouped at the core of the book (cats.25-46).

Attribution to a specific weaving centre is almost impossible for these ornamental pieces, as their models and variants circulated all over Europe. Some of them are of great decorative value, such as the three fragments of a *Millefleurs with Landscape and Animals*, showing deer, a unicorn and other creatures among trees on the far bank of a river, suggesting some earthly Garden of Eden (cats.29-31). Another type, a *Verdure with Fowlers*, from a southern Flanders series with exotic figures, wild



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animals and fantastic beasts, depicting fowlers catching birds amid large flowers and leaves (cat.42), is quite original, and many related pieces are illustrated here for the first time.

Among the figurative pieces, at least a dozen may be considered to be of museum quality. The most important revelation is undoubtedly a Franco-Flemish piece of around 1480, the heraldic *Allegory of the Marriage Union of Louis, Bastard of Bourbon, and Jeanne de Valois* (3), in which design and iconography are related to that of the world famous *The Lady and the Unicorn* series in Paris. Three ladies are shown cutting flowers in an orange grove, while winged genets stroll around them. This

appears to be a heraldic pun, the French 'genette' alluding to 'Jeanette' or Jeanne de Valois, to whom the tapestry is dedicated.

The collection includes several most important and interesting pieces from the medieval 'German' production of the Upper and Middle Rhine and Switzerland. Secular or religious moral themes are developed on scrolls in a *Worrying Maiden* (cat.6), and in a lovely *Esther and Ahasuerus* (5), both from Strasbourg, circa 1500. An impressive antependium with a *hortus conclusus* shows the Virgin Mary with a unicorn on her lap (cat.7). Since the abovementioned *The Lady and the Unicorn* series at Cluny is considered a paragon of



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tapestry weaving, collectors are always keen to acquire a piece on that theme, and the Zaleski Collection can proudly display no fewer than four such textiles (also cats.27, 29 and 40).

The early modern production of the Brussels manufactories is represented by three outstanding pieces. An *Annunciation* (cat.20) echoes Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of 1511 with its fanciful architecture. *Baptism of Christ* (4), formerly in the collection of the

Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, provides an example of how cartoons were adapted and slightly changed in a given period, as can be seen through comparison with similar pieces now in Vienna, Florence and Riggisberg. Another devotional piece, *Penitence of Saint Jerome*, may once have belonged to Cardinal Wolsey (3). Forti Grazzini traces several other textiles by the same hand, now attributed to the anonymous 'maestro della candela

spenta' (Master of the Spent Candle). A beautiful *Nativity* (cat.47) can now be connected to Parisian production in the early 16th century, where and when the immigrant Flemish painter Gauthier de Campes was at the hub of tapestry design.

As in his many other tapestry publications, Forti Grazzini has written erudite and elaborate entries, citing and illustrating numerous parallel examples and shedding light on many

1 *Penitence of St Jerome*, Brussels, c. 1520. Tapestry; wool, silk, and gold and silver threads, 1.33 x 1.69 m (4'4" x 5'7"). Zaleski collection, cat.22. All images courtesy of Gallery Moshe Tabibnia

2 *Scenes from the Life of Solomon*, north Switzerland, 1598-1610. Embroidered table cover; wool and silk, 1.78 m x 2.01 m (5'10" x 6'7"). Zaleski collection, cat.76



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iconographic aspects. Some discussion, however, is always left open for specialists.

I doubt that the lady on the unicorn, with a squirrel on her shoulder (*Millefleurs with Virtue*, cat.40), can be considered an allegory of Prudence; the animal already appears as a domestic pet in the medieval Life of Esther in the cathedral of Zaragoza, Spain.

An ornamental piece (cat.51) with four emblems framed by laurel crowns, copied from woodcuts by Gilles Corrozet, is attributed to Bruges but its saffron-yellow ground seems to point instead to a Parisian workshop: a similar heraldic piece with the arms of Etienne Barbier and Françoise Charrier (cat.36) is correctly linked to a French centre. However, here the device should be read: '*Rien trop peu - à coeur souffisant*' (nothing too little - for a conceited heart), as '*souffisant*' is

not the same as the word '*souffrant*' (suffering).

Compared to tapestry, literature about embroidery and needlework is rather scarce, so the two introductions to that part of the catalogue are all the more welcome. They deal with the workshop practices and the sometimes complex relations between patrons, painters and embroiderers, and with the specific iconographic requirements of the disciplines. Several pieces from this section are outstanding examples of this art form, for instance a Swiss embroidered table cover with episodes from the life of Solomon (2), a French needlework bed valance with *Allegories of Smell and Sight* (cat.78), and the Rhenish wall hanging *Under the Signs of Mercury* in the same technique (cat.79).



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3 Fragment of *Allegory of the Marriage Union of Louis, Bastard of Bourbon, and Jeanne de Valois*, Franco-Flemish, ca. 1480-1488.

Tapestry; wool and silk, 1.91 x 1.97 m (6' 3" x 6' 5"). Zaleski collection, cat.13

4 *Baptism of Christ*, Brussels, c. 1528-1530.

Tapestry; wool, silk, and gold and silver threads, 1.71 x 1.96 m (5' 8" x 6' 5"). Zaleski collection, cat.21

5 *Esther and Ahasuerus* fragment, Alsace/Strasbourg, c. 1500-1510. Tapestry; wool, silk and metal threads, 0.89 x 1.09 m (2' 11" x 3' 7"). Zaleski collection, cat.9