THE GARDEN OF FALSE LEARNING

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Few people are familiar these days with the Table (or Tablet) of Cebes, a once renowned literary work of ancient Greece. In the past few centuries this pagan Pilgrim’s Progress has only rarely appeared in print, and then usually tucked in at the end of Epictetus, to make a thin book a bit thicker. The obscurity in which it languishes does not, however, seem entirely unmerited, and to those who know and love John Bunyan’s immortal work it makes dull enough reading. Yet in renaissance Europe it had an enormous popularity, being reprinted time after time. Its moralistic tone seemed in accord with the religious temper of the period and appealed to Protestants and Catholics alike. Among the former, John Bunyan showed that he knew the Table of Cebes well enough; and the Jesuits, influenced perhaps by its emphasis upon morality and education, had by 1599 included it in the Ratio studiorum.

The reputed author of the Table, a philosopher named Cebes of the Greek city of Thebes, was a follower of Socrates and one of the characters in the Phaedo. Learned opinion, however, believes the Table to be either the work of a much later writer bearing the same name or a forgery concocted in the first century after Christ. Its overtones of Cynic and Stoic philosophy, one is told, could not possibly be found in the writings of a disciple of Socrates.

It takes no more than an hour to read the Table of Cebes. The story is as follows: Strangers visiting the temple of Saturn in Thebes are attracted by a tablet on the wall which bears a mysterious design. An old man, noticing their puzzled expressions, explains that the design symbolizes the course of human life, its trials and eventual rewards. His interpretation, one will note, applies the Socratic doctrine that only the education of the mind and the consciousness of virtue can lead to happiness. Life, the old guide explains, is shown as a plot of ground, contained within a wall and subdivided by two other concentric walls, each with a gate. At the gate of the outermost wall are the souls of infants about to enter life. As each passes through the portal into a large inclosure and becomes a young wayfarer, he meets various allegorical figures of dubious virtue, who point out the easy pleasures of existence. Drunk with the wine of Error and Ignorance, with which he has been plied, the average wayfarer devotes himself to riotous living and soon enough endures the usual aftermath of pain and misery. When all seems lost, Penitence rescues him, and at length he reaches a gate of the inner wall, beyond which are found those who, seeking Learning (also given by various translators as Discipline, Knowledge, Culture), are misled by False Learning. The arts and sciences and the more polite vices take up much time in this pleasant region. The wayfarer might discover, however, even from False Learning, information that could be useful on the last lap of the journey. Thus fortified, some wayfarers carry on, and, like Christian and Hopeful in their quest for the Celestial City, after a painful pilgrimage reach the innermost gate, guarded by the figure of True Learning, beyond which is Happiness, and journey’s end.

A long introduction, this, to the gift of a large embroidered hanging of the French Renaissance, which Mrs. Constance McCann Betts, Mrs. Winston F. C. Guest, and Frasier W. McCann have presented to the Museum, together with an important Brussels tapestry. These objects formed part of the collection of their parents, the late Mr. and Mrs. Charles E. F. McCann. The scene represented in the embroidery is the second inclosure of the Table of Cebes, which may be appropriately called
the Garden of False Learning. Until now, the piece has merely been described as the Triumph of the Arts and Sciences, as in the recent catalogue of the McCann sale.

The hanging is one of a series of three panels which together illustrate the whole Cebes story. The first of the series, showing souls who await entry into the first inclosure and the various trials in store for them, is in the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris. Unfortunately the halftones available are so poor that they cannot be reproduced. The hanging from the McCann collection is the second panel. The third is in the collection of Mrs. Anne Archbold of Washington; it shows the wayfarer crowned in triumph by godlike Happiness, having drunk the “sovereign medicine” (symbolized by the fountain) and thus counteracted the evil potions given him in the first inclosure.

All three embroideries have similar grotesque borders. The pieces in the Musée Jacquemart-André and in the Metropolitan Museum bear in their borders the same pair of arms, not yet identified but presumably French since one of each pair is encircled by the collar of the Order of Saint Michael.

The Museum’s panel shows the young wayfarer welcomed by False Learning at the gate of her garden. She is “neatly dressed and of a good appearance,” but there is evidently deceit in her heart, for “the vulgar and those who take up with the show of things ignorantly call her Learning.” On the greensward within the inclosure are groups of extravagantly dressed people, some garbed in the contemporary modes of the Renaissance, others in pseudo-classical dress. One knows who they are from reading the text and from studying the several sixteenth-century prints illustrating the Table in which each personage is carefully labeled. In the lower row, immediately to the left of the gate, are two richly gowned ladies and a gentleman, who probably symbolize such base qualities as Ignorance, Extravagance, and Folly. Further to the left, a group of three men meets the eye, an orator and a poet crowned with laurel and a scientist. Next comes a geometer, who leans against the railing of the inclosure and measures arcs with the intensity of a high-school sophomore. An astrologer with an armillary sphere completes the lower register. At the extreme left of the upper row a geographer is seen with his symbol, the globe, followed by an astronomer carrying a quadrant, and a mathematician with a table of numbers. Seated on the grass are two lovers holding a songbook and three musicians accompanying them with harp, lute, and viola da gamba. The last figure is a woman representing either Temperance or Fortitude, who extends her arms in encouragement to the wayfarer on his journey to the last inclosure.

It was often customary in the sixteenth century to use prints as models for embroidery designs. The Museum’s new hanging is based on a woodcut illustrating the Table of Cebes by a certain David Kandel of Strasbourg. Although Kandel is perhaps best known for his illustrations for Bock’s Kreutterbuch, a work on herbs, the Cebes print may well be his masterpiece. The surprising thing is that he made it in 1547, probably before he was twenty years old. In developing the composition he borrowed a number of his ideas from Holbein’s famous title-page border of this subject, used in the Tertullian of 1521, which, incidentally, was also the inspiration for numerous other Cebes prints. And it may be noted that of all the Cebes versions, the Holbein included, David Kandel’s is in many ways the clearest and, illustratively, the best. The entire group, it may be added, brings to light an extraordinary aspect of renaissance culture. It shows, in fact, that the development of interest in classical archaeology was so intense that artists even sought to give visual expression to an ancient work of art that had existed only in fiction. Although such efforts may well be classed as pseudo-archaeology, the results, as our hanging suggests, were none the less fascinating.

This woodcut measures 12½ inches by 15¾ inches; the numerous figures in it are, therefore, very small. And since the only available illustrations are again unsatisfactory halftones, one must once more take refuge in the wartime necessity of omitting an illustration.
The Garden of False Learning, from the “Table” of Cebes. A XVI century embroidered hanging.
Gift of Mrs. Constance McCann Betts, Mrs. Winston F. C. Guest, and Frasier W. McCann
The Wayfarer Crowned by Happiness, another embroidered hanging from the Cebes series. In the collection of Mrs. Anne Archbold.
Those interested in studying the Kandel print can find a reproduction in Archives alsaciennes d'histoire de l'art, deuxième année, 1923, page 92. They will discover that the Museum's hanging follows the middle section of the print with but slight changes. A drummer and a flautist are left out, as is also the rocky approach to the final gate, and the landscape is decidedly more naturalistic.

The hanging in Mrs. Archbold's collection shows a similar dependence upon the Kandel woodcut; but the Jacquemart-André embroidery seems to be taken from some other design, and although it closely resembles Holbein's Cebes border, it is not based directly on it. Doubtless some as yet unknown print forms the missing link between Holbein and the Jacquemart-André embroidery.

The delightful grotesque decoration of the borders of these hangings recalls the work of the Antwerp school of designers and especially of Cornelis Floris, whose wayward inventions in ornament are renaissance antecedents of Rube Goldberg and Salvador Dali. Although the chimera land of the borders is not enough like Floris's work to indicate a definite connection, a comparison between the two does serve to suggest an approximate date for the border ornament: not later than 1570. Together with the certain date of the Cebes woodcut (1547), this leads one to ascribe the hanging to the third quarter of the sixteenth century, or shortly thereafter.

It is more difficult to establish the place of origin, and the present treatment is only tentative. The problem is complicated: the Cebes design is German and Swiss; the border reveals strong Flemish tendencies; and the arms are presumably French. Therefore, it seems wisest to be guided by certain indications.

While German, Swiss, and Flemish designs could readily be used in other countries—for prints fly about with the wind—the arms, if they are French, would probably be used only in France. That is one indication. Another is the tradition, as yet unproved, that the hanging came from a château which stood in the path of the fighting during the first World War. Charles Sterling of the Museum staff, who has devoted much time and thought to the study of the French Renaissance, furnishes yet another clue when he observes that the stepped eaves of the roofs which appear in the embroidery (and not, it should be noted, in the Kandel print), are of a north French or Flemish type. Certainly, if French, the hanging is from the northernmost regions.

Be that as it may, the Garden of False Learning and its two companion pieces from the Cebes set count as distinguished members of a most select needlework group, there being surprisingly few renaissance embroidered hangings to match them either in quality or in size. And in their subject matter they have still another claim to distinction, for the Table of Cebes seems unique among tapestries and embroideries. It is easy to understand, then, why the Garden of False Learning must be classed as one of the finer achievements of renaissance embroidery.

The Museum's hanging is exhibited in Gallery H 15.

For those interested in technique and condition: the threads are wool and silk; the stitches, gros and petit point. Except for repairs to the border and the restoration of the lower half of the bottom border and the outer edge of the right border, the hanging is perfectly preserved. The quotations in this article are taken from an eighteenth-century translation of the Table of Cebes by Samuel Boyse.

The Museum is deeply indebted to Mitchell Samuels for his kindness in placing at our disposal the information in his possession regarding the three panels.