An anonymous friend has presented the Museum with two of the many fine tapestries recently sold from the house of the late Harry Payne Whitney at 871 Fifth Avenue. It is particularly gratifying when someone approaches the Museum—as our anonymous friend has done—and makes an unexpected offer “out of gratitude for the many pleasant and instructive hours spent in the galleries.”

Thanks to him the collections of eighteenth-century decorative arts will be enlivened by two handsome and brilliantly colored tapestries from the series of nine pieces known as the History of France. Since this set represents the final phase of tapestry work under the ancien régime, the facts concerning it have an unusual interest.

Ever since 1777 Louis XVI had been acquiring paintings at the biennial exhibitions of the Paris Salon, with the idea, it seems, of using them as models for this new series. But it was not until 1791—just before the Reign of Terror—that the set appeared as the finished product of the Gobelins looms. In order of composition the nine paintings that formed the models for the History of France series are: the Death of Du Guesclin, the Continence of Bayard, President Molé Arrested by the Frondeurs, the Burghers of Calais, the Death of Leonardo da Vinci, the Combat of Marcel and Maillard, Sully at the Feet of Henry IV, the Assassination of Admiral Coligny, and the Recapture of Paris by the Constable of Rochemont.

It is indeed curious that not once in this series of incidents from French history is a Bourbon Louis a principal actor. Louis XVI, who himself selected the subjects for this set, seems deliberately to have sought escape from the pomp and circumstance of his immediate Bourbon past—the past which was soon enough to engulf him—in the heroics of a more distant, half legendary France. In his choice of subjects he is as romantic as any Victorian ruler.

Louis’s early-blooming variety of romanticism is charmingly exemplified by the Museum’s two hangings from the set, Sully at the Feet of Henry IV and the Continence of Bayard. The guidebook of the Salon of 1777 describes the subject of the latter: the Chevalier Bayard, the booklet tells us, was subject to a temptation from which even heroes are not exempt. Once in Grenoble a young girl who had been chosen as his companion surprised him by bursting into violent tears. When he asked her the trouble, she replied, “The poverty that has brought my mother to the threshold of death has now placed me at your discretion.” Then she added dramatically, “If only death had preceded my dishonor.” The chevalier sans peur et sans reproche was very neatly put on the spot, but he rose to the occasion handsomely, saying, “I am incapable of struggling against such beautiful sentiments. I have always respected honor and nobility. You have both, embellished by your beauty.” He thereupon arranged a fitting marriage for her, and supplied her with a generous dowry, which in the tapestry he is in the act of bestowing upon her mother.

The other tapestry, Sully at the Feet of Henry IV, illustrates a scene from a play, Partie de chasse de Henri IV. Our particular scene occurs in the gardens of the chateau at Fontainebleau, where Sully, alone with the king except for the Swiss guards near by, tries to prostrate himself before his monarch. With rare foresight, however, Henry refuses to allow it, since courtiers in the distance might believe that his minister was imploring forgiveness for some real crime. In this way the magnanimity of a great ruler is made evident.
Sully at the Feet of Henry IV, a tapestry woven at the Gobelins factory in 1792
This tapestry bears the inscriptions Le Barbier l'Ainé pinxit 1783 and Cozette 1792. Jean Jacques François le Barbier (1738-1826), whose painting was the model for the tapestry, was one of the well-known historical painters of the day. Pierre François Cozette was chief of one of the three ateliers at the Gobelins factory in which tapestries were woven on the high-warp loom. It is recorded that he worked on at least two sets of these History of France hangings. The companion tapestry, the Continence of Bayard, is after the painting by Louis Jacques du Rameau (1733-1796), another historical painter of the day, and although it is not signed or dated, it was probably made a few years before or after 1790. Both tapestries have the same handsome border imitating a richly carved gilt frame of the Louis XVI period. They are now exhibited in Gallery H18.

Detail of the Continence of Bayard, a Gobelins tapestry made about 1790