A "Credo" Tapestry:

A PICTORIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE APOSTLES’ CREED

1. Credo Tapestry. German, about 1550. Wool and silk. 11 feet 6 inches x 15 feet 10 inches. Gift of The Hearst Foundation, Inc., 60.182
The most generally accepted tenets of Christian belief are contained in the two statements of faith known as the Nicene and Apostles’ creeds. That adopted at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 is the longer and is used throughout Christendom. The shorter, the Apostles’ Creed, has been used throughout Western Europe since the fourth century and was, according to medieval tradition, first recited by the twelve apostles at Pentecost, each apostle uttering one of the twelve articles under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. The Credo was naturally a subject congenial to medieval art. It was generally illustrated by a number of individual scenes, sometimes twelve or less, but often more.

During the fifteenth century there developed, especially in Germany, one of the most potent means of disseminating images and ideas ever invented: printing—specifically, woodcut printing. The simple figures and scenes of early woodcuts bespeak their essentially popular function: they served to instruct and inspire a broad public, the great majority of whom could not read. The Credo was a logical theme for such didactic art, and although almost all prints representing it have disappeared, presumably worn out by hard use, those that remain (see Figure 2) usually show the customary division into twelve or more separate scenes, each so explicit in its imagery that its meaning can be conveyed, if necessary, without words.

Closely linked with such woodcuts, both in
3. I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth

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Certain details show a marked similarity with those in woodcuts. In the illustrated Augsburg print (Figure 2), the Pope, carrying the keys of St. Peter and wearing the triple tiara, is posed facing a stylized basilica as a symbol of the Church; the tapestry uses almost the same composition, reversed (Figure 16). The figure of Christ as judge of the world, flanked by the Virgin and St. John (Figure 14), is also very similar in both print and tapestry. In the background of the Ascension scene in the tapestry (Figure 12), Christ's footprints are shown (they are unfortunately invisible in the black-and-white reproduction), impressed into the hill from which he arose. The same detail, a common, if apocryphal, pictorial motif, may be clearly seen in the Augsburg print, and is even more prominent in an illustrated book containing the Credo (see Figure 13) published in Ulm in 1485. The Ulm book provides perhaps the strongest link of all with the tapestry: the two angels, blowing trumpets to arouse the dead from their graves (Figure 18), so closely resemble those in the tapestry (Figure 19) that a common origin seems likely.

It is, however, extremely risky to attempt to ascribe such scenes to any exclusive source. The weavers of the tapestry, like the printmakers, were drawing upon a large body of common-place images—a sort of graphic lingua franca—for their compositions. Such symbols as the red roses of sacrificial love, used as a background for the Crucifixion (Figure 7), or the vase of flowers in the Annunciation, suggesting the purity of the Virgin (Figure 5), would have been immediately comprehensible even to the most unsophisticated. And no one would have been puzzled by the use of a grotesque monster's head to represent the gate of hell (Figure 9). The hell mouth had been in use in religious art for centuries (Figure 10) and in this period was part of the customary stage scenery for mystery plays. Most people would also have been able to identify the naked figures kneeling in the jaws as Adam and Eve, redeemed by Christ's sacrifice. In fact, only a few of the details used here might have been obscure to contemporary viewers. Few probably
would have known that the division of the front of Christ's sarcophagus (Figure 8) into three panels could be traced back to the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, where there were three small windows in the slab standing in front of the rock on which Christ's body was believed to have lain. In Western art these were usually reduced, as here, to mere decoration.

The panel of the Nativity (Figure 6) is especially rich in these time-honored pictorial conventions. The kneeling pose of Mary and Joseph, adoring the Child, was popularized in an influential book of the late thirteenth century, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. This was written by a Franciscan monk, once thought to be St. Bonaventura, who enriched the Gospel narratives with all sorts of picturesque details, culled from many earlier sources. The colorful fancies preserved and spread by Pseudo-Bonaventura provided inspiration to artists for centuries afterward. In the *Meditations* also appears the charming tradition that an ox and an ass warmed the newborn Child with their breath. The two kneeling angels reflect still another lovely story in the *Meditations*, that angels came down to earth at the birth of Christ, "to see the face of their Lord God." The lighted candle in Joseph's hand is often found in Flemish versions of the same subject and is thought to be related, like the mouth of hell, to stage representations of the scene. The flowering staff over his shoulder recalls a legend current in the Middle Ages, according to which Joseph had been but one of Mary's suitors. Seeking a sign from heaven, the high priest left all their staves on the altar of the temple, and Joseph's miraculously sprouted and bloomed, indicating that he was to be Mary's husband.

Although the tapestry is without question a product of Northern inspiration and workmanship, it contains traces of Italian Renaissance influence, which in the sixteenth century was accomplishing a drastic artistic revolution beyond the Alps. This influence is particularly evident in a few panels roughly clustered about the center. The Annunciation (Figure 5), for example, takes place entirely in the open, without any sign
9. He descended into hell

10. Capital, showing the hell mouth, from Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert. French, before 1206. The Cloisters Collection, 25.120.4

11. The third day he rose again from the dead
12. He ascended into heaven

13. The Ascension, from Erklärung der zwölff Artikel des Christenlichen gelaubens (Ulm, Konrad Dinkmut, 1485). Woodcut. $3\frac{1}{4} \times 2$ inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 56.567.46

14. From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead
of the enclosure that is usually found in Northern versions of the scene. The Italian approach also affects the treatment of Christ’s Resurrection (Figure 11), in the calm stance of Christ before the tomb (in German medieval art it was more common to show him climbing out), and in the poses of the sleeping soldiers. The loosely flowing drapery used throughout the tapestry is more typical of Italy than the nervous, angular folds with which Flemish and German artists usually enveloped their figures. This is nowhere more apparent than in the panel in which a penitent, prompted by his guardian angel, confesses his sins (Figure 17); the officiating priest in particular is completely Renaissance in style. Incidentally, during the Reformation, when this tapestry was woven, the validity of the sacrament of penance was one of the bitterest issues between Catholics and Protestants.

The over-all tenor of the work is, however, conservative, even provincial. The folk-art quality of its scenes is reflected in the wide borders at the top and bottom, whose quatrefoil pattern is reminiscent of cross-stitch embroidery. The design is in fact very close to those for embroidery: one very much like it appears in a woodcut pattern book (see Figure 21) of the kind that spread needlework fashions across Germany in the sixteenth century. There is in addition one very curious and significant feature to these two borders. For more than half their width, from left to right, they proceed evenly and systematically, but near the division between the three left-hand rows of panels and the two right-hand ones they undergo a subtle alteration, becoming at once darker and less regular. (The extreme variations in the right ends, however, are probably due to later restoration.) This incongruity is reflected in the panels as well as the borders. The scenes to the right are more agitated, not so well organized, and fussier in decoration; faces are rounder and more doll-like; colors and shadings are harsher, with heavier emphasis on midnight blue. There can be little doubt that two different sets of weavers were involved. It is not a question of the two parts having been woven separately and then spliced together, since the warp threads run the entire width of the piece without a break.
Rather, it appears that the poorer style of the right part was the result of a later weaving by less dexterous hands, seeking to imitate the left. It is not unknown for a donor or patron to be portrayed in a work of art commissioned by him. The small, detached, praying figure rising up in his tomb in the right corner of the Judgment scene (Figure 14) can probably be identified as such a donor, if only because, unlike the other resurrected souls, he wears a bright robe. His head is not shaven, and his robe is red, so he must have been a layman, not a cleric. Otherwise there is no sign of his rank or identity, nor any tribute to worldly pride or status. Like the tapestry presumably made at his order, his portrait is refreshingly unpretentious.

The distinctiveness of this tapestry is made all the clearer by contrast with other Credo tapestries of the period. Unfortunately none of the known examples is complete, but one in Boston (Figure 22), which illustrates the first four articles of the Creed, is typical. It was probably made in the cosmopolitan Flemish center of Brussels.
20. And life everlasting

21. Pattern from *Eyn New Künstich Mödelbuech* (Cologne, Peter Quentel, 1544). Woodcut. Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna
Its atmosphere is courtly, its allegory complex, its composition crowded. A multitude of figures fills its panels. Below each scene is pictured not only the apostle supposed to have uttered that particular article, but also an Old Testament prophet whose words were thought to prefigure the article. The names and appropriate quotations are written out upon elaborate scrolls, indicating that the audience for whom the work was designed was mainly a literate one.

The intricacy and sophistication of this Flemish tapestry can only be fully appreciated after long and patient examination. The approach of its designers could not have been more different from that of the German weavers. The difference lies not merely in the relative plainness of the German tapestry, or in the greater polish of the Brussels tapestry: there is between them a fundamental divergence of artistic intention. The German tapestry is concentrated; the Flemish, elaborate. The Flemish work seems designed to impress; the German, to teach. The main charm of the German tapestry, in fact, is that it says much with small means. It is this purposeful economy of expression that makes it so appealing, and turns its simplicity to art.

REFERENCES

22. Credo Tapestry. Flemish (Brussels), 1450-1500. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston