The Annunciation Tapestry

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And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.  Luke 1:28

Ave Gratia Plena—“Hail (Mary), full of grace”: the angel’s words appear on the scroll before him. As the Annunciation has been selected for the Bulletin cover, a few facts from a continuing study of this tapestry panel will be of interest.

The Annunciation must have been in America before 1922, when it was shown in a loan exhibition in San Francisco. In 1924 it was acquired by Mrs. Harold Irving Pratt, who was told that the tapestry came from a Spanish cathedral, in all likelihood Gerona. More recent evidence suggests that the Annunciation hung in one of the chapels of the cathedral of Tarragona, and this has been substantiated by a resident of that city who says that it hung there for many years in his youth. A search of local records and publications has thus far failed to confirm this statement. However, comparison of the weave, design, style, and colors of our fragment with those of the tapestry showing Good Government (Figure 3) in Tarragona Cathedral affords many analogies. Furthermore, two tapestries in the nearby cathedral of La Seo in Saragossa are also closely related; they were bequeathed to the cathedral by the archbishop of Saragossa, Dalmacio de Mur, who had been archbishop of Tarragona, and before that, bishop of Gerona. This might explain the Gerona tradition. One is the Crucifixion (Figure 4); the other depicts scenes from the life of Christ.

It has been possible to identify with certainty only the sinister section of the coat of arms of our Annunciation panel. It is that of the Escales family. Except for the cross, these arms are restored, as are parts of the room in which the Virgin is seated, in particular the section at the upper left of the tabernacle and the lower left part of the base of the freestanding column.

When, during the Hundred Years’ War, Paris lost its supremacy as the great medieval tapestry center, Arras and later Tournai became the European centers for the tapestry industry, largely due to the patronage of the dukes of Burgundy. Many of the relatively few medieval tapestries surviving today are considered to be of Arras workmanship: an “arras” became synonymous with the word tapestry even as far away as Spain and Italy.

The only tapestries that can with certainty be ascribed to the Arras workshops are fourteen scenes (surviving from what must originally have been eighteen) ordered from the shop of Pierre Feré (active 1395-1429) and given to the cathedral of Tournai by Toussaint Prier, chaplain of the Duke of Burgundy. Each originally seventy-two feet long, they represent the lives of saints Eleuthérius and Piat. These tapestries bear many resemblances both to the Annunciation panel and to the tapestries in Tarragona and Saragossa mentioned above. Also quite similar in style to all of these are two small tapestries rich with metal threads: the Entombment and the Resurrection, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Resurrection, in the Louvre.

Melchior Broederlam of Ypres, the greatest Flemish painter before the Van Eycks, was called in the account books of Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy, “varlet de chambre” after 1387 and “peintre monseigneur” after 1391. Among Broederlam’s many commissions, including flags and pennants, we find that he even made drawings for tiled floors. He painted the exterior wings of
the great altarpiece for the cloister of Champ-mol near Dijon, for which he was paid in 1394 although it was not installed until five years later. The Annunciation he painted on one of the wings was often copied, and influenced many illuminated manuscripts. The dependence of the designer of our Annunciation tapestry for composition and design on the Broederlam altarpiece suggests that Broederlam himself may have made the drawing and even the cartoons for our tapestry panel.

Further studies of documents and existing tapestries may substantiate the assumptions set forth in this note.

Fig. 1. Detail of Fig. 3, showing an emperor with the seven liberal arts and the four cardinal virtues
Fig. 2. The complete Annunciation panel
Fig. 3. Good Government, tapestry in Tarragona Cathedral, early xv century, Flemish

Fig. 4. The Crucifixion tapestry, wool and metal threads, bequeathed to the cathedral of La Seo in Saragossa by Dalmacio de Mur, early xv century, Flemish. 13 feet 8 inches x 27 feet 7 inches