“Hunters live in this world more joyfully than any other men. For when the hunter riseth in the morning, he sees a sweet and fair morn and clear weather and bright, and he heareth the song of the small birds, the which sing so sweetly with great melody and full of love, each in its language in the best wise that it can. . . . And when the sun is risen, he shall see fresh dew upon the small twigs and grasses, and the sun by his virtue shall make them shine. And that is great joy and liking to the hunter’s heart.”

With such words of praise for the noble sport of hunting, Edward, the second Duke of York, begins his book The Master of Game. Edward’s book, in large part a translation of the famous French hunting book Le Livre de la chasse by Gaston Phoebus, gives the most complete account in English of a medieval stag hunt. Edward was Master of Game to his cousin King Henry IV. Thrice a traitor, he had more reason than a disinterested love of hunting to translate Gaston Phoebus’s book and to dedicate it to young Prince Hal, under whom as Henry V he was to fight and die at Agincourt in 1415. Gaston Phoebus was himself as stormy a petrel as Edward, changing sides at will in the Hundred Years’ War. Froissart, who spent much time at Gaston’s court in southern France, gives a vivid account of Gaston “the noble and gallant count of Foix, surnamed Phoebus on account of his beauty and the splendor of his presence, adroit at all exercises, valorous, an accomplished captain, noble and magnificent.” The amusements at Gaston’s court were “games of address and force; tilts, tournaments and huntings more laborious and almost as dangerous as war itself.”

The Master of Game is the best source of information for the medieval stag hunt as it is represented in some of the Museum’s medieval tapestries. In the very early morning each of the lymers sets out with his lymer, or scent hound, on leash in quest of the stag. When a stag of suitable size and maturity (at least six years old), has been tracked to his lair, the lymerer marks the covert where the stag is harbored and hurries back with his report to his lord, the master of the hunt, and to the gathering of hunters who

ABOVE: Illustrations from “Le Livre de la chasse” by Gaston Phoebus, in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Left, the lymerer and his dog track a stag to its lair; right, the lord and his company assemble to decide which stag to hunt.
have assembled “on some pleasant gladsome greene” of the forest. Over a leisurely hunt breakfast including “divers meats set upon great platters” supplied “well and plenteously,” the lord and his company listen to the reports of the rival bernes on the stag each has harbored. After due discussion of the size of the footprint of each stag, its gait, its droppings, and perhaps the height of the fraying post where the animal had rubbed his antlers, the lord finally decides which stag to hunt that day.

The lord, or in his absence the master of the hunt, then posts the relays, that is, he tells the kennelmen where to go, each with a brace or two of hounds on leash, in couples. These relays are posted along the line the stag is expected to take when he breaks covert. They are later let slip at the stag after he has gone by to provide fresh impetus to the main pack.

When the relays have been posted the hunt begins. The main company, with the pack of hounds, follows at a stone’s throw behind the lymerer and his dog until the quarry is roused. As the stag springs from his lair, the lymer blows three notes on his horn for the uncoupling of the hounds, and the tallyho is cried to announce that the stag has broken covert. The hounds are laid on, and the whole assembly then sets out in full cry after the game, as the hunters sound the “laisser courre” on their horns. As the hunt proceeds the hart may resort to various ruses to throw the hounds off his track. He may “change” with another stag, which he does by pushing him up and making him take his place in the chase. As another ruse the hunted stag may double in his tracks, called “foiling,” or he may take to the river and swim upstream, called “beating up the river,” or swim downstream, called “foiling down.” Whenever the main pack are confused by such ruses, the lymerer and his scent hound are brought up to “unravel the change” and to start the pack off on the right track again. As a last resort stags were sometimes said to take a mighty leap into an impenetrable thicket where the hounds were unable to follow.

The winded stag, if he has not been able to escape by these ruses, stands at bay surrounded by the hounds, and the horn is sounded for the capture. The master of the hunt then rides up and dispatches him, usually with a sword, no easy task when the desperate animal uses a large pair of antlers in self-defence. The dead stag is “undone,” or cut up. The huntsmen sound the mort, and the hounds are rewarded with prized titbits, the best being reserved for the lymer who had tracked the animal to his lair. Then the company returns to the lord’s castle, where the “menée” is sounded at the castle door. The hunters are given supper, which “should be well ordained.” No ale but only wine was to be served that night “for the good and great labour they have had for the Lord’s game and disport” and “that they may the more merrily and gladly
tell what each of them hath done all the day.”

During a hunt the forest echoed with the sweet baying of the hounds, the cries of the hunters, and the sound of their horns, which were blown with a system of long and short blasts to announce the different stages of the hunt. One hunting book says, “it is impossible for those who see a course to avoid hallowing,
since it would almost make a dumb person speak.” Gace de la Buigne, a hunting chaplain of the French court, compared the notes of the hounds to the various voices in a choir and roundly declared “no Alleluia has ever been sung in the chapel of the king that is so beautiful and gives so much pleasure as the music of hunting hounds.”

It is proper at times to speak to the dogs, “for they rejoice to hear the voice of their master.” Gaston Phoebus recommends that the huntsman speak to his hounds “in the most beautiful and gracious language that he can, especially when the weather is bad or the hounds are hunting over a difficult country for they will be much comforted and encouraged.” The kennelman “must be both gracious and courteous, gentle and naturally fond of dogs; good on foot and in wind, as well able to fill his horn as his bottle,” according to a sixteenth-century hunter du Fouilloux. The lord looked after his hounds better than his serfs. On returning from a hunt the hounds were to be littered with fresh hay, “their feet well greased and given sops and well eased for pity of their labor.” Hounds were sometimes sent to the seashore to be bathed or even taken on pilgrimages if there were fear of their going mad.

Two kinds of dogs were chiefly used in stag-hunting, the snub-nosed hounds, staunch but not fast, who hunted by sense of smell, and the long-nosed greyhounds, fleet of foot, who hunted by sight. The greyhound of Latin Gaul was described by Statius as “swifter than a thought or a feather in the wind.” The Book of St. Albans describes a good greyhound as “well shaped when it is headed like a snake, necked like a drake, breasted like a lion, footed like a
cat, and tailed like a rat.” The greyhound was the constant companion of his master and the emblem of faithfulness, “courteous and not too fierce, courageous and lively, glad and joyful and playful, well willing to all manner of folke save to wild beasts to whom he should be fierce, eager and spiteful.” The terms greyhound and running hound are used by _The Master of Game_ in a broader sense than they would be today.

Stag-hunting by strength of hounds is well represented in several series of medieval tapestries in this Museum. In a series bequeathed by Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney a medieval hunt is portrayed from the time the lord rides out over the drawbridge of his château until his return. In one scene the stag is at bay, the huntsmen blowing the prise to assemble the hunting party and the lord of the hunt riding in for the kill. In another section of the same series the lymerer presents his dog with the stag’s head, as King Modus directs, to reward him for unharboring the beast, the other hounds receiving their reward apart. Another section shows the stag undone. Game was an important item on the table of those who could procure it, and each of the hunt officials was entitled to certain parts of the animal.

In the famous set of unicorn tapestries at The Cloisters the story of the unicorn is told as if it were a medieval stag hunt. In the first tapestry, for instance, some of the hunting party are guided by one of the hunters to the lair of the unicorn, which is shown in the second tapestry. The lymerer who has uncovered the animal points to the unicorn as he holds his scent hound on a long leash. The thick covert of the lair is represented by bushy undergrowth so
that the splendid costumes of the hunters will not be obscured by the forest. The costumes indicate the varied degrees of rank typical of a medieval hunt from the lowly varlet of rustic appearance to the lords of the hunt in feathered hats and short open cloaks. One must allow a certain license to the tapestry-designer’s desire to give a decorative effect since some of the richest costumes would hardly have been worn in a dash through thick forests. Most of the active hunters wear the simple doublet more practical in the field. Some wear the customary high hunting boots. Everyone in a hunt could carry a horn, but the long thin hunting horn, as well as the hunting sword, was usually worn by the higher grade of hunters and not the kennelmen.

The regular procedure of a stag hunt is followed in most of the succeeding tapestries of the set. The relays of hounds are let slip along the line of flight as the animal takes to the water in a vain attempt to elude his pursuers, until he is finally at bay, kicking and slashing in self-defense. At this point the progress of the hunt is interrupted to introduce the traditional scene, here represented by two fragments of tapestry, in which the unicorn is driven into the lap of a maiden and there taken. In the next tapestry the hunt is brought to its conclusion as the master of the hunt draws his sword to give the coup de grâce and the body of the beast is brought to
the entrance of the château in ceremonious fashion.

The hunt of the unicorn takes place, as customary, in the forest of the lord of the hunt, whose château appears several times in the background. The forest was "the highest franchise of princely pleasure" in the words of Sir John Maneuwood, and its use was severely restricted.

The richly mounted dog collars worn by the greyhounds in the tapestries are decorated with initials and coats of arms. This was a kinder and less disfiguring way of identification than the crossed swords which were branded on the hounds of the Saxon court—a mark made famous by Meissen porcelain.

Two tapestries recently acquired by the Museum as part of the Mary Stillman Harkness Bequest represent the second and fourth stages of an allegorical stag hunt. The complete story can be reconstructed from the set of miniature tapestries in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Lehman (who were among the first American collectors of Gothic tapestries), now lent by Mrs. Lehman to The Cloisters for exhibition there. The hunted stag is called the Cerf Fragile because he represents man's life on earth, mortal and transitory. At first he must run, for the hound of youth is in pursuit. He has hardly started from his lair and but entering manhood when Dame Ignorance and Lady Vanity, who lay in wait for him with relays of hounds, let loose their dogs labeled as Desire, Rashness, and Overconfidence, and Vanity sounds the horn. So the stag is pursued in the vigor of manhood through pleasant glade and forest meadow, running with zest while the hounds only add excitement to the chase. At last, his powers somewhat declining, he tries to throw the dogs off the scent by foiling and taking to the water, but Age, the huntress with crooked back and staff, is not fooled by such a ruse and sets on new hounds to afflict him—Ague, Heat and Cold, Heaviness, Care, and Trouble. In the end Dame Sickness thrusts the stricken hart with her relentless spear as Death in lordly fashion sounds the mort.

By the sixteenth century the rigors of the medieval hunt had been relaxed to meet the greater ease and comfort expected by the great lord and his court. The ancient and laborious custom of hunting by force of hounds was often abandoned. In order to provide "recreation without unmeasurable toyle and payne" the royal courts arranged stag drives in which vast numbers of woodsmen, varlets, and squires beat up the game, which was then driven into an ambush where the lord and his party were waiting to make the kill, or have it made for them.

A tapestry once belonging to the Metternich family and now in this Museum shows such a drive in progress. The winded stags, driven into the water by the hounds, are at the mercy of the crossbowmen who line the bank of the river and can take the game at their ease. Hardly a century earlier Hardouin de Fontaines-Guérin, a contemporary of Gaston Phoebus, had declared that he would like to see hanged all who killed stags with "arrows barbed with iron." Such "sure-fire" hunting foreshadows the enormous and unsportsmanlike stag drives which made it possible for two successive electors of Saxony to record with pride a total slaughter between them of 110,530 deer, 54,200 wild boar, and a proportionate number of smaller game.

In the upper right corner of the tapestry is an open park with a row of carefully planted trees. On such an "extensive and delightful plain" in the vicinity of Windsor Castle the
Duke of Württemberg hunted during a visit he paid Queen Elizabeth in 1592. His secretary describes the "sixty parks full of game ... so contiguous that, in order to have a glorious and royal sport, the animals can be driven out of one enclosure into another." How different is the playful spirit of this hunt from the robust days of Gaston Phoebus! "In the second enclosure they chased the stag for a long time backwards and forwards with particularly good hounds; at length his highness shot him in front with an English crossbow."

The lore or science of hunting became as elaborate as these hunts themselves. Hunting terms and procedure were as strictly followed as any other court ceremony. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as a penalty for their misuse, a person was laid over the back of a large stag and "given the blade." Each blow with the flat of the sword was accompanied by a rhyme which Baillie-Grohman translates roughly:

Jo, Jo, ha, ho! this is for the king, princes and lords!
Jo, ha, ho! this for the knights, huntsmen and serving men!
Jo, ha, ho! and this by the noble laws of venery!

The culprit then had to stand up and offer thanks for not receiving more punishment. It all sounds like a fraternity club initiation.

The French court continued the medieval custom of hunting stags by strength of hounds into the eighteenth century, but in a less vigorous form than in earlier days. The series of tapestries known as the Hunts of Louis XV, exhibited in this Museum in the French tapestry show of 1947, portray such a hunt in progress in the forest of Fontainebleau.

With the decrease of game, the reduction of the great hunting preserves, and the mounting costs of keeping a large retinue, the ancient sport of stag-hunting has gradually died out. Its practice added much to the vigor and stamina of the medieval knight, and at its best it probably helped lay some of the foundations of good sportsmanship which the modern age has inherited—and sometimes discarded.


A stag drive, showing the kind of hunt arranged for courts in the sixteenth century, in which the game was driven into ambush and taken. French, early xvi century. Rogers Fund, 1915