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Extra Credit Assignment
The Unicorn Tapestries
BUF 2246- OL35

“The Unicorn Tapestries” are one of the last living memories from the Middle ages and from the renaissance era. The phenomenal works of art, dating back to the start of the 16th century that highlights the trend of the European times with works being done with attention to detail as well as reflecting and portraying the popular ideas, beliefs and traditions from the time. The collection is a 7-piece tapestry assortment, currently being showcased at The Cloisters at The Met, all pieces are highlighted by the appearance of Unicorns, a Greek mythical creature that’s best known for its therapeutic properties from its horns and also that of being invincible. The beliefs of the time created an affection and desire for the magical creature and its miraculous cures that the Unicorn could provide, creating the main narrative of the collection in hunters trying to capture this mythical creature. A lot is unknown about the pieces, being that they were created or first documented in 1680, and survived not only the time, but also looting, revolutions, wars and various hands swapping before finally all being united for the Cloisters at the Met. Even though questions remain about its creations, “The Unicorn Tapestries, as the group of seven is known, were probably designed in Paris but woven in Brussels.”

My personal favorite tapestry from the collection is the one known as, “The Unicorn lives in a Garden” (1495-1505), this tapestry vividly shows an innocent looking unicorn, tamed and constrained by a fence and tied to a pomegranate tree. The piece originally belonged to the Le Rochefoucauld family of France, and through various passing and life ordeals, eventually reunited with the rest of the collection at The Met. In the hunt for the creature, it appears as if the unicorn has been finally captured and is sitting innocently, unsecured, seemingly happy as he isn’t escaping the easily escapable fencing and seemingly loosely tied to a pomegranate tree. It’s a luxurious tapestry made from wool warp with wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts. “In order to make the tapestries, plain wool yarns (the warp) were stretched between two beams of a large loom; a bobbin

then brought dyed and metallic threads (the wefts) over and under the warp threads to create the design. Chemical analyses reveal that the dye pigments used in the Unicorn Tapestries came from such plants as weld (yellow), madder (red), and woad (blue), all of which are grown in the Bonnefont Cloister garden. With the aid of mordants, substances that help fix the dyes to fabric, these three primary colors were blended to achieve a dazzling spectrum of hues strategically highlighted by the addition of metallic threads.” This piece as with the rest of the collection was created in Paris but woven in the Netherlands, it’s a fairly large colored tapestry print (144 7/8 x 99 in), and was gifted by John D Rockefeller to the Met and The Cloisters in 1937 as his mission to gather and unite all seven unicorn tapestries. The image portrayed gives a great question in the sense that we don’t really know if the unicorn is captured, as the surroundings and setting portrayed all imply joy and happiness. The outer part of the fence is filled with various different plants and flowers, symbols and different displays of the time. The unicorn appears to have a blood marking on its skin, but instead this most likely resembles the red stain from the dripping bursting pomegranates above, a symbolism to fertility and marriage in the medieval times as with the other parts of the tapestry in symbolizing these same ideas.

The amazing narratives and imagery that’s highlighted in these works of art is beyond amazing. The attention to detail, dealing with such a difficult task and with different materials and colors, to be combined all together into creating the great work of tapestry is remarkable. I personally too have a great affection for Unicorn’s since a child, just for the joy and happiness they always represented, and If I could create my own tapestry I would love to incorporate Unicorns into it as well. I would however not have the same story behind my work in chasing and capturing this mythical creature, but instead I will highlight its magical powers, ability and hope that it produces. I Personally loved how colors of the dyes the were used in the collection, especially the use of

silver shiny touches. My tapestry would portray a Unicorn, magically flying through a beautiful sunset setting, featuring a lot of clouds and happy vibes.

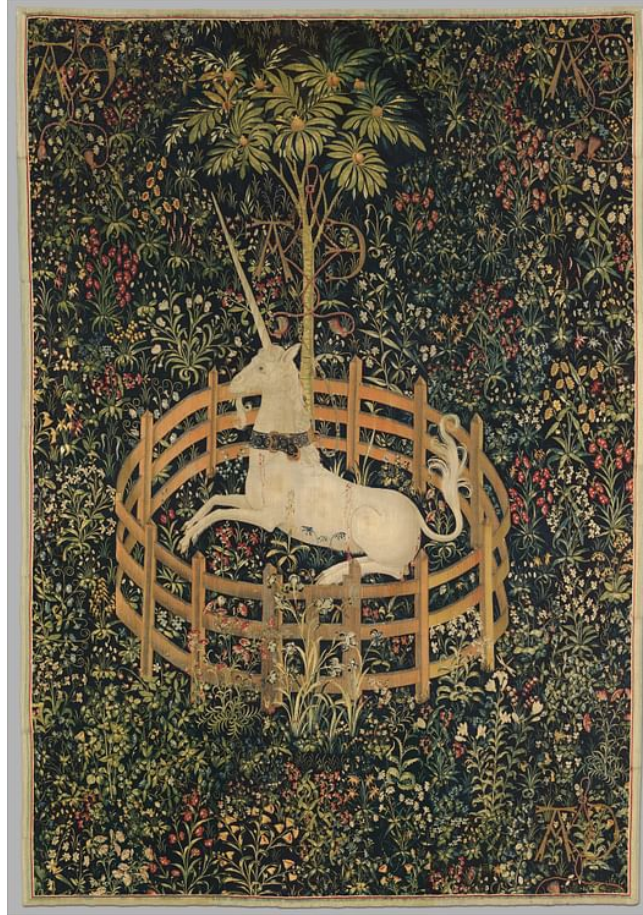


Figure 1. “The Unicorn Rests in a Garden (from the Unicorn Tapestries)” 1495-1505, Made in Paris, France(Cartoon); Made in Southern Netherlands(woven), Culture: French(cartoon)/South Netherlands(woven), Medium: Wool warp with wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts, Dimensions: 144 7/8 x 99 in., Textiles – Tapestries, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr, 1937, Accession Number: 37.80.6



References:

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