

About the Sequence of the Tapestries in *The Hunt of the Unicorn* and *The Lady with the Unicorn*

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ALTHOUGH THE ICONOGRAPHICAL aspects of these two celebrated series, the first at The Cloisters and the second at the Musée de Cluny, have been covered in numerous publications, the sequence of the tapestries in *The Hunt of the Unicorn* has been the subject of some controversy, and that of *The Lady with the Unicorn* is a question that seems not to have been raised so far.¹

Establishing a narrative sequence for *The Hunt of the Unicorn* is problematic, because among its seven tapestries there are two—*The Start of the Hunt* and *The Unicorn in Captivity*—that are in a style entirely different from the others. This fact has been variously interpreted as indicating that these two panels were designed by a different artist, woven in a different workshop, added to the series at a later date, or not part of the series at all.² Furthermore, the tale told in the *Hunt* is composed from two, possibly three, differing and even mutually exclusive versions of the same story.

According to unicorn lore the animal was so swift, wild, and strong that it could not be taken alive, and could be killed only after having succumbed to the attractions of a maiden, to whom it was drawn by the sweet smell peculiar to virgins; afterwards, “as the Physiologus says,” it was to be “brought to the palace of the king.”³

The reason for hunting this elusive animal was the desire to possess its horn, which allegedly had the power to neutralize poison. In its natural habitat the gentle unicorn was said to purify water by dipping its horn into streams and springs that had been

polluted by the venom of snakes, whose prior visits had made the water undrinkable for other animals.⁴

The sequence of the tapestries within the series as established in their publications by James Rorimer and Margaret Freeman is: *The Start of the Hunt*, *The Unicorn at the Fountain*, *The Unicorn Tries to Escape*, *The Unicorn Defends Himself*, *The Unicorn Is Tamed by the Maiden* (preserved only as a fragment), *The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle*, and finally *The Unicorn in Captivity* (Figures 1–7). Geneviève Souchal, while separating *The Start of the Hunt* and *The Unicorn in*

1. James J. Rorimer, “The Unicorn Tapestries Were Made for Anne of Brittany,” *MMAB* n.s. 1 (1942) pp. 7–20, ill.; Pierre Verlet and Francis Salet, *La Dame à la Licorne* (Paris, 1960); James J. Rorimer, *The Unicorn Tapestries at The Cloisters* (MMA, New York, 1962); Dora Heinz, *Mittelalterliche Tapissereien, Zeit und Farbe* (Vienna, 1965) pl. 13, p. 40; Maria Gräfin Lanckorońska, *Wandteppiche für eine Fürstin: Die historische Persönlichkeit der “Dame mit dem Einhorn”* (Frankfurt am Main, 1965); Edith Holm, *Die Einhornjagdtapete der Anne de Bretagne, Die Jagd in der Kunst* (Hamburg/Berlin, 1967); Geneviève Souchal, “Un Grand Peintre français de la fin du XVe siècle: Le Maître de la Chasse à la Licorne,” *Revue de l’Art* 22 (1973) pp. 22–49, ill.; idem, *Masterpieces of Tapestry from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century*, exh. cat. (MMA, New York, 1974) nos. 18–24, *The Hunt of the Unicorn*, ill.; nos. 37–49, *The Lady with the Unicorn*, ill.; Margaret B. Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (MMA, New York, 1976); Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, *La Dame à la Licorne* (Paris, 1978), Eng. trans., *The Lady and the Unicorn* (Paris, 1979).

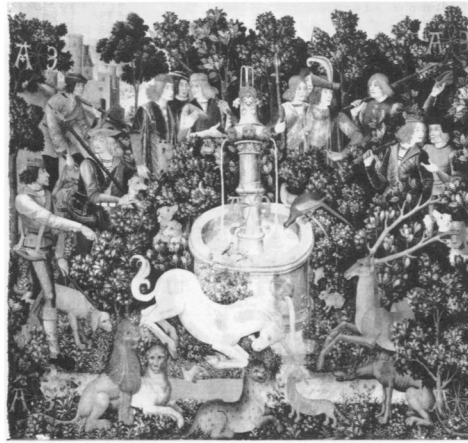
2. Discussed in Freeman, *Unicorn Tapestries*, p. 178.

3. Odell Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn* (Boston, 1930; Harper Colophon ed., New York, 1979) p. 47.

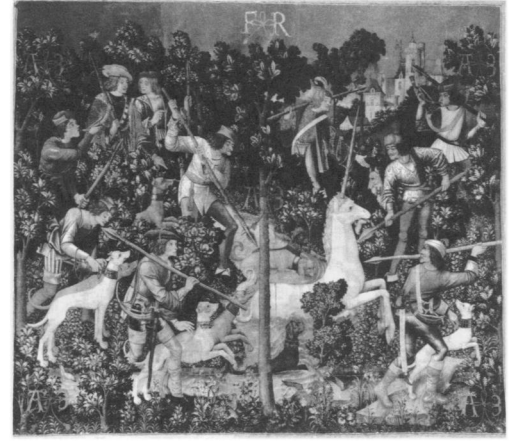
4. Shepard, *Lore of the Unicorn*; Rüdiger Robert Beer, *Einhorn: Fabelwelt und Wirklichkeit* (Munich, 1972); Nancy B. Hathaway, *The Unicorn* (New York, 1980).



1. *The Start of the Hunt*



2. *The Unicorn at the Fountain*



3. *The Unicorn Tries to Escape*

1–7. Traditional arrangement of *The Hunt of the Unicorn*. Tapestry (wool, silk, and metal thread), H. 12 ft. 1 in. (3.68 m.); Figure 5, 6 ft. 8 in. (2.03 m.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1937, 37.80.1–6, 38.51.1,2

Captivity from the others as the first and second pieces of a second series, lists what she calls the first series (Figures 2–6) in the same generally accepted order.⁵

This arrangement of the five tapestries in the “first series,” however, has a strangely unstructured appearance without a central focus. Moreover, its sequence is not easily compatible with the real-life equivalent of the mythical unicorn hunt, the stag hunt, from which all the technical details represented in the

tapestries are borrowed. The most authoritative medieval work on hunting, the *Livre de chasse* of Gaston Phébus, comte de Foix, of 1387,⁶ describes how a

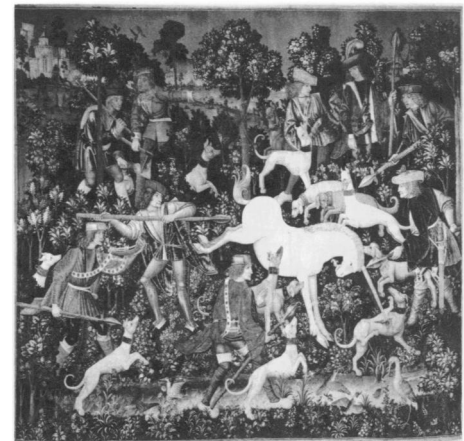
5. Though *The Start of the Hunt* and *The Unicorn in Captivity* are connected with *The Hunt of the Unicorn* series by the same enigmatic cypher A-E woven into their design, it is possible that *The Start of the Hunt* is the sole survivor of another hunting set, perhaps depicting a stag or boar hunt, and that *The Unicorn in Captivity* was a single emblematic piece and not part of a series at all. It certainly does not fit into the story told, though it has been interpreted as a symbol of the Resurrection after the killing of the Unicorn, if the Unicorn hunt is seen as a parable of the Annunciation and the Passion of Christ. Beer (*Einhorn*, fig. 135) tries to reconcile the divergent facts by captioning *The Unicorn Is Killed* as “Das Einhorn wird in den Hals getroffen und für tot ins Schloss gebracht” (The Unicorn is being wounded in the neck and brought to the castle presumed dead).

6. Gaston Phébus, comte de Foix, *Le Livre de chasse*, ed. Gunnar Tilander, *Cynegetica XVIII* (Karlshamn, 1971) chaps. 1, 28–31, 36, 39.

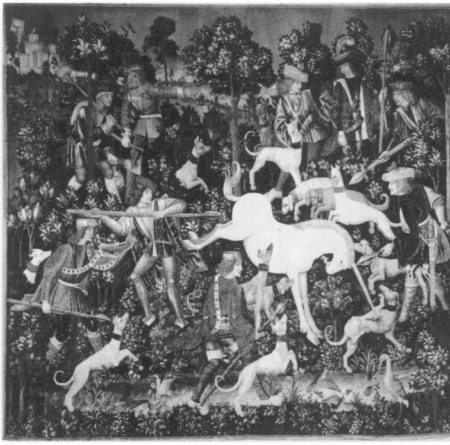
8–12. Suggested arrangement of *The Hunt of the Unicorn*



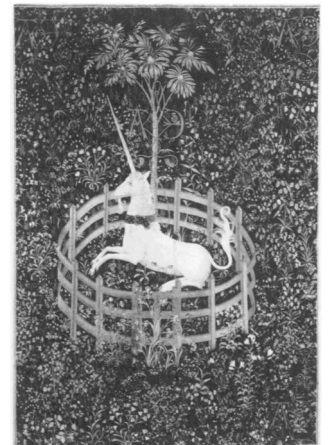
8. *The Unicorn at the Fountain*



9. *The Unicorn Defends Himself*



5. *The Unicorn Is Tamed by the Maiden* (fragment)



4. *The Unicorn Defends Himself*

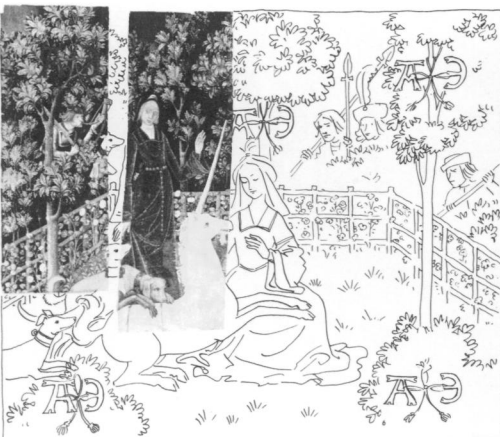
6. *The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle*

7. *The Unicorn in Captivity*

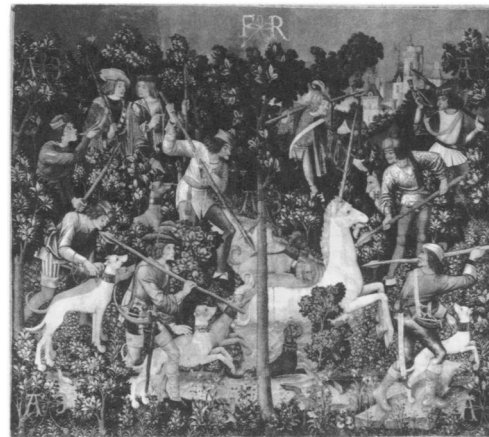
hunted stag might first turn at bay and defend itself valiantly, then might run and try to throw the hounds off its scent by crossing running water. Finally, according to the rules, it was the proper end of a good hunt to force the stag into a lake or some other deep water to slow it down, and even to let the shock of cold water bring about heart failure in its overheated body. This sequence of events suggests that *The Unicorn Tries to Escape* should follow rather than precede *The Unicorn Defends Himself*. Furthermore, the fact that there are six episodes of the story represented in five tapestries (in the fifth, two events—the killing of the Unicorn and the transport of his dead body to the castle—are shown simultaneously) indicates deliberate planning, perhaps to accommodate the hanging space in a given baronial hall.⁷ In designing a set of tapestries an odd number would lend itself more nat-

urally to a symmetrical arrangement than an even one. Such a symmetrical arrangement, which also reflects a sequence compatible with the lore of the unicorn as well as with the rules of the stag hunt, can be achieved by making *The Unicorn Is Tamed by the Maiden* the third tapestry in the series. The sequence would then read *The Unicorn at the Fountain*, *The Unicorn Defends Himself*, *The Unicorn Is Tamed by the Maiden*, *The Unicorn Tries to Escape*, and *The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle* (Figures 8–12). In this sequence not only does

7. A very similar composition with the spearing of a stag in the background, and a group of travelers with loaded pack-horses being met at a castle, is on the tapestry *Gypsies at the Châteaueau Gate*, in The Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire; see Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry*, no. 57, pp. 137–139, ill.



10. *The Unicorn Is Tamed by the Maiden* (reconstruction)



11. *The Unicorn Tries to Escape*



12. *The Unicorn Is Killed and Brought to the Castle*

a telling alternation between static and dynamic motifs in the panels become apparent, but there is also a symmetry in the arrangement of major architectural elements in the design: the fountain in the first tapestry, the rose bower of the *hortus conclusus* in the third, and the castle in the fifth. Even minor details, such as the buildings in the backgrounds, are thus symmetrically placed in the upper left corners of the first and second panels, and in the upper right corners of the fourth and fifth.

The Hunt of the Unicorn was designed to tell a story, and its sequence can be arranged accordingly. *The Lady with the Unicorn*, on the other hand, represents an allegory of the five senses, a much more elusive system. Fortunately, the heraldic iconography of this set is clear, in contrast to that of *The Hunt of the Unicorn*, which is still enigmatic, and it is this heraldry that offers a clue to the sequence of the panels.

The bends and crescents so generously displayed on banners, standards, shields, and armorial cloaks have long—at least since 1883—been recognized as the arms of the family Le Viste, a newly ennobled clan

of lawyers, high-ranking civil servants, and financiers, originally hailing from Lyons, but holding key government positions in Paris during the second half of the fifteenth century.⁸ The name Le Viste, an archaic form of *vite* (swift, fast), might have been the reason for choosing the swift unicorn as an emblem.⁹ The Lion, which is the Unicorn's constant companion in the tapestries (though constantly ignored, as the very title of the series indicates), is probably a canting device for the Le Vistes' Lyonnais origins.¹⁰ As a family of rather recent importance they had not received a properly granted coat of arms; the armorial bearings (gules, a bend azure charged with three crescents argent) are heraldically incorrect.¹¹ However, these *armes*

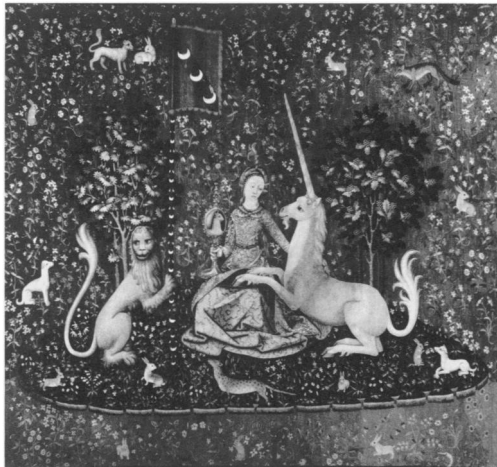
8. Lanckorońska, *Wandteppiche*, pp. 50–52; Erlande-Brandenburg, *Dame à la Licorne*, chap. 1.

9. The Unicorn as a chastity symbol has been the reason for the almost universal interpretation of these tapestries as a marriage present.

10. The arms of the city of Lyons are gules, a lion argent, a chief azure charged with three fleurs-de-lys or.

11. Jougla de Morena, *Grand Armorial de France*, 6 vols. (Paris,

13. *Sight*



14. *Hearing*



15. *A mon seul désir (Touch)*



13–18. Suggested arrangement of *The Lady with the Unicorn*. Tapestry (wool and silk). Paris, Musée National des Thermes et de l'Hôtel de Cluny (photos: Musées Nationaux)

16. *Touch*



à enquérir seem to have been a matter of stubborn pride with this family of self-made men. In the tapestries heraldic custom is further violated by the use of the square banner, the prerogative of knights bannerets, in every one of the series of six; the far less offensive, because lower-ranking, double-tailed standard is used only four times.

Much has been written about the identity of the Lady and that of the original owner of the tapestries, sometimes with widely divergent results.¹² One question, though, whether the series has an intended sequence, seems not to have been considered. In previous publications the panels have been listed in practically every possible order.¹³ There appears, however, to be a simple numerical code in the design of the tapestries themselves.

This code makes use of the ostentatiously displayed Le Viste arms. In the tapestry *Sight* they are shown only once, on the banner held by the Lion. In *Hearing* they appear twice, on the standard and on the banner. In *Touch* they are represented three times, on the square banner held up by the Lady herself,

and on the two targes the Lion and the Unicorn wear slung around their necks. In *Taste* the standard, the banner, and the two armorial capes of the animals display the arms four times, while in *Smell* they are to be found on the Lion's shield, on the targe of the Unicorn, on the banner held by the Unicorn, and,

1934–52) VI, nos. 35.103 and 35.104: Le Viste. A branch of the family, created comtes de Montbrian in 1756, bears heraldically correct arms: gules, a bend argent charged with three crescents azure.

12. In the 19th century the tapestries, by reason of the three crescents, were said to have been made for Prince Zizim, the exiled brother of Sultan Bajazet, and his French ladylove. Later, practically every bride who married into the Le Viste family between 1480 and 1515 has been suggested as the fortunate first owner. Lanckorońska (*Wandteppiche*), in a different approach, has proposed Margaret of York, duchess of Burgundy, who would have received the series as a present from one of the Le Vistes in high office. To this I would like to add that the fictitious arms of Queen Guinevere in the 15th century were gules, a bend argent charged with three crescents azure; see Michel Pastourneau, *Armorial des Chevaliers de la Table Ronde* (Paris, 1983) p. 83.

13. Verlet and Salet, *Dame à la Licorne: La Vue, L'Ouïe, L'Odorat, Le Goût, Le Toucher*; Heinz, *Mittelalterliche Tapisserien*:

17. *Taste*



18. *Smell*



whimsically but ingeniously, twice on the Lion's standard, which doubles back on itself, thus making a total of five (Figures 13, 14, 16–18).

The sixth tapestry, in which the Lady stands in front of a tent bearing the enigmatic inscription A.MON. SEVL.DESIR.V, surprisingly has the Le Viste arms on display thrice: on the standard held by the Lion, on the tent pennon, and on the banner held by the Unicorn (Figure 15). This tapestry has been regarded by most scholars as an emblematic piece, showing the Lady, for whom the series would have been woven as a marriage gift, in the act of choosing her bridal jewels, or, in the most recent interpretation by Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, putting her jewelry back into the casket as a symbolic renouncement of all passions excited by the senses.¹⁴

If, however, following the numerical code of the Le Viste arms this tapestry were put, instead of *Touch*, into the third place of the series, the arrangement of five tapestries would become a symmetrical one, with the tent as the centerpiece, flanked by two panels with major structures in their design, the table with the organ and the rose bower, and with two plainer groups on either end. The tapestry *A mon seul désir*, with the Lady handling her jewelry and the two heraldic beasts grasping the tent flaps, could easily be taken as an allegory of the sense of touch. The *Touch* panel, with the Lady holding the banner-shaft in her right hand and touching the Unicorn's horn with her left, might have been designed as an alternative piece, to be used depending on the wall space available. In that event the series could be divided into two groups of three: *Sight, Hearing, Touch*; and *Taste, A mon seul désir, Smell*.

Touch, in any case, appears to be from a different hand. Though its fleury background teeming with animals seems to be superficially the same as in the other tapestries, there are several beasts and birds, such as the lynx, the multicolored spotted panther, the pheasant, and the partridge, that are not to be

found elsewhere in the series. The genet this panel shares with *Sight* and *Taste*, its Lion, and particularly its shaggy-coated Unicorn look almost like different species. Another unusual feature is that the lynx, the panther, the genet, and both monkeys are collared, while in the other panels only some of the dogs (four out of nine) have collars. The Lady of *Touch*, furthermore, wears a dress markedly different in style from the others, and she is the only one with free-flowing, uncovered hair. The two targes worn by the Lion and the Unicorn are oddly repetitive compared with the carefully planned use of varied types of equipment in the other tapestries, such as the square banner opposed to the double-tailed standard (Figures 14, 15, 17, 18), or the Lion's triangular "shield for war" and the Unicorn's squarish targe as "shield for peace" in *Smell* (Figure 18);¹⁵ even in the one case where two identical pieces of equipment are used—the armorial cloaks in *Taste*—the Lion's cloak has the bend in the arms reversed, as does the Lion's shield in *Smell* (Figures 17, 18).¹⁶

To strive for a well-balanced symmetrical composition for an entire set of tapestries would have been only natural for a designer working out his sketches on paper, unrestricted by the realities of hanging space. Even in their mutilated condition the five tapestries of the "first series" of *The Hunt of the Unicorn* give the impression of such a balance. *The Lady with the Unicorn* represents another, more flexible solution, with alternative panels adaptable to differing locations and wall spaces.

We shall probably never know which halls in which châteaux were first hung with *The Hunt of the Unicorn* or with *The Lady with the Unicorn*. For the sake of their designers, who spent so much thought and effort on their composition, we can only hope that there was once a time when these tapestries were shown in their intended sequence.

Gehör, Gesicht, Geruch, Geschmack, Gefühl; Lanckorońska, Wandteppiche: Gesicht, Gehör, Geruch, Geschmack, Gefühl; Souchal, Masterpieces: Sight, Hearing, Smell, Taste, Touch; Freeman, Unicorn Tapestries: Sight, Hearing, Taste, Smell, Touch; Erlande-Brandenburg, *Dame à la Licorne*: La Vue, L'Ouïe, Le Goût, L'Odorat, Le Toucher, but in the English edition of his *étude* they are listed as Taste, Sight, Smell, Touch, Hearing.

14. Erlande-Brandenburg, *Dame à la Licorne*, p. 12.

15. There is even a technical mistake in the representation of the targe carried by the Lion: the targe's *bouche*, the cutout de-

signed for fitting in the lance in couched position, is nonfunctionally closed. I do not know of any other example of such a closed *bouche*.

16. It is proper heraldic etiquette to reverse the charges of the dexter shield (from the viewer's point the one on the left) *pour courtoisie*, if two shields are shown side by side. In this way heraldic animals, such as lions, do not face away from the other shield. This *courtoisie* was the rule for marriage-alliance arms in Germany and adjacent parts of Western Europe; there it was the more important shield of the husband that was reversed.