

A SET OF FOUR VERY FINE GOTHIC TAPESTRIES.

BRUSSELS, CIRCA 1500.

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These beautiful examples of Gothic weaving are a set that illustrate a famous medieval allegory, representing Man's Redemption, or also otherwise known as "The Conflict of Virtues and Vices".

During the Middle Ages relatively few people could read, and all teaching, particularly moral and religious teaching was graphically conveyed by means of pictures or dramatic representations. The walls of churches were decorated with religious and moral scenes that could be readily interpreted by the majority of the people. In addition, there were the Miracle plays, Paternoster plays, and the Morality plays of the 14th and 15th centuries, in which we find the inspiration for the design of these tapestries, which are the subject of this article. The Miracle plays had to do with the subject of Man's Redemption, while the Moralities were an allegorical embodiment of the everlasting conflict of Virtues and Vices, insofar as they concerned Man.

A great series of tapestries was woven during the Gothic Period (about 1490 to 1510) based on these themes, and the series referred to starts with the Creation of Adam and Eve, passing through the Passion of Christ, and ending with the Last Judgment. In the entire series is the recurring motive of the Conflict of Virtues and Vices over the helpless figure of Man, "Homo", ensnared of Luxury,

threatened by Justice, protected by Mercy, followed by Temptation, and finally saved by the Grace of God.

Our set of four tapestries is part of this famous series, of which examples are in celebrated collections throughout the world. This set has been thoroughly described in detail in two illuminating articles by the late D. T. B. Wood, "Tapestries of the Seven Deadly Sins", illustrated and described in The Burlington Magazine, Vol. 20, pages 210-222, and pages 277-289, January and February, 1912, and includes examples at Hampton Court, the Louvre, the Cathedral of Saragossa, and the Cathedral of Palencia.

The subjects of our four tapestries exemplifying Man's Redemption, and the Conflict of the Virtues and Vices, are as follows:

1 - "THE PRODIGAL SON".

On the upper left, the youth is portrayed taking leave of his mother. Continuing to the right, the youth and his companion are beguiled by Temptation and one of her handmaidens. On the upper right, Music assists the Vices in leading the youth and his companions astray. On the lower left, Luxury, Dissipation and Worldliness tempt the youth with wine and other pleasures forbidden at home. In the center foreground, a group seated before a decorative hanging includes the youth and Dissipation. He presents her with a bag of gold, while a page at their left delves into a treasure chest for other gifts. To the right of this scene the youth is seated at a table feasting. Gluttony approaches, offering him a plate of fruits. In the lower right hand corner, the Vices continue to detain the youth and his companions.

Size - 21' wide by 13'5" high.

2 - "THE VIRTUES AND THE SALVATION OF MAN".

On the upper left, Mercy is depicted, holding a lily branch. She is surrounded by a group of Virtues, one of whom kneels before her. Continuing to the right, in another group of Virtues is Man, guided by a Virtue. Most of this group are absorbed in discussion. To the right is Peace, holding an olive branch. On the upper right is Christ, enthroned and holding a sceptre. On his Right, Mercy, holding a lily branch, and on His left Truth offers Him a book. She is accompanied by Justice holding the scales, and a hand-maiden of Truth, who holds a mirror. Two other Virtues approach the throne from the left.

On the lower plane, to the left, the Virtues all listen to the debate of Justice and Peace. Justice kneels on the ground, her sword resting at her side, while Peace, holding the olive branch in her hand, delivers her message, her right hand upraised. A second large group, to the right includes Truth, kneeling in the foreground, holding her mirror reflecting her image. Other Virtues surround her, including Nature, holding a rake, and Time, holding a sun-dial. Numerous figures, some representing virtues, others, Man and his companions, are engaged in a discussion of the Salvation of Man.

Size - 21'0" wide by 13'5" high.

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3 - "MUSIC".

In the lower plane of the immediate foreground, justice brandishing her sword, fiercely attacks Man, whose arms are upraised to protect himself from her blows. Mercy restrains Justice, and Peace kneels beside them. Directly above, Justice again attacks a group of musicians. The one in the most danger from her immediate attack, is Man with a flute, while the lady holding the mandolin is obviously frightened. Further to the right are additional musicians, and a lady seated at an organ, apparently unaware of the attack of Justice. Similarly, a group seated around a table at the left, including a man playing a flute and a lady singing, are in no way concerned by the attack of Justice.

In the upper plane at the left, a beautiful designed group of the Virtues discussing the saving of Man, whilst in the center, Christ is enthroned, surrounded by Mercy and Peace on one side, and Justice and Truth on the other. At the extreme right, Man armed and lying on the ground, is attacked by Justice and other Virtues.

Size - 21'4" wide by 13'7" high.

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4 - "DANCING"

In the center of the lower plane, two lightly clad dancers are posed. Other dancers behind them imitate their movements. At the left are a group of musicians and spectators.

In the upper plane are groups of lovers, while in the center, a delightful group of singers. At the extreme left is a charming composition depicting the culmination of the romance, and showing man and his beloved, surrounded by a group of the Virtues. An adjoining group depicts men and women gathering roses from bushes and baskets.

On the right a group of Vices approach on animals, including Luxuria (Luxury) on a pig, combing her hair and admiring her reflection in a mirror, Invidia (Envy) on the donkey, whose name is inscribed on her robe, Impenitencia (Impatience) on the camel, and Avaricia (Avarice) on a goat, holding a purse in her left hand, and a gold cup in her right. Directly above on a lion, another Vice, and directly below on a fabulous animal, wearing a high ornamental collar is Ira (Anger), in her left hand clasping the end of a linked chain, which is secured to the high ornamental collar of the animal.

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The entire set of four tapestries are entirely intact with their beautiful original narrow Gothic floral borders, woven with flowers and fruits and leaves in natural colors on a dark blue ground. The tapestries for the greater part even retain their red selvages, which is unusual for tapestries of such antiquity.

Although the designer of the series is not definitely known, he was undoubtedly a cartoonist or an artist influenced by the Flemish masters of the late 15th century, such as Gerard David, Hugo Van Der Goes, and Roger Van Der Weyden. The tapestries are examples of pure Flemish art, both as to design and weave.

It is of further interest to note that two of these tapestries were exhibited in the famous art exhibition held in Madrid in 1892, to commemorate the Four Hundredth Anniversary of the Discovery of America, and they are recorded in the catalog issued at that time, Nos. 122 and 123.

The above set of four tapestries formerly  
in the Cathedral of Palencia, in Spain.

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