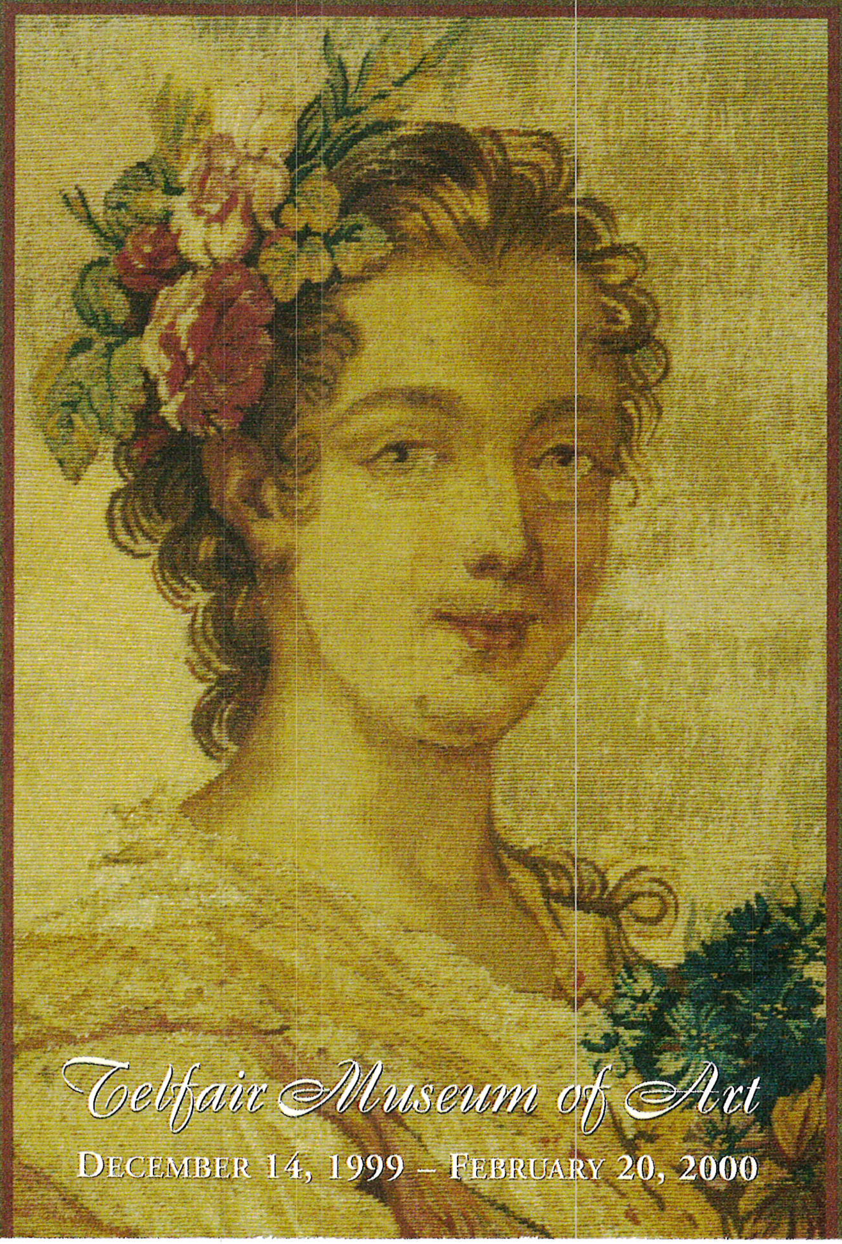
# Threads of Time:

## FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF TAPESTRY FROM THE BLAU FAMILY



### *Telfair Museum of Art*

DECEMBER 14, 1999 – FEBRUARY 20, 2000

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are honored to present an important selection of tapestries from the Blau family collection and Vojtech Blau Gallery, Inc. Arthur Kouwenhoven, a strong supporter of this museum, suggested the subject and provided an introduction to Mr. Blau.

Tapestries, given their monumental size, need large spaces and the Telfair's rotunda was chosen as the perfect gallery for their display. This remarkable show extends the Telfair's range of exhibition subject matter and provides a close look at a rare and beautiful art form.

Mr. and Mrs. Blau and Simona Blau deserve our grateful thanks for their willingness to share their treasures with our large Telfair audience.

Diane Lesko, Ph.D.
*Executive Director*

*Cover.* ***Portrait of a Girl,*** *French, c.1750. Design after François Boucher. Wool warp; wool and silk weft. 19"h x 16"w*

# *Threads of Time:*

## FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF TAPESTRY FROM THE BLAU FAMILY

### AN INTRODUCTION TO TAPESTRY

A tapestry is commonly defined as a fiber-based wall hanging, particularly one that is large or historic. It can, however, be made of any material, and it need not be large or in the form of a mural; indeed, many types of textiles, such as a Navajo rug, a Chinese K'o-ssu, and most Inca tunics, are all tapestry woven. The term "tapestry" applies to a weave structure in which the wefts (the horizontally laid threads) pass over and under alternating warps (the vertical threads), completely covering them. In general, no single weft yarn travels all the way across the width of the tapestry. Instead, individual colors of threads are woven across selected warps, creating areas of distinct tone and design. Tapestry is a variation of the most basic structure of all, the plain weave, and was simultaneously developed by ancient civilizations around the world (Illustration 1). This art form's complexity comes not from the structure of the weave but from the ability of specialized weavers to join minute, interlocking fields of color to form the figures and shadows of the final product.

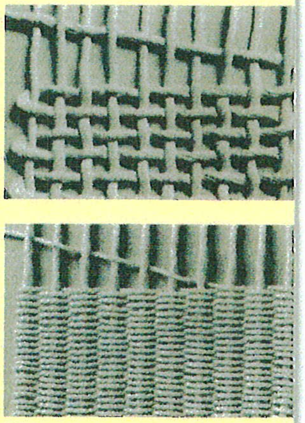


*Illustration 1. Examples of plain weave.*

Since the Middle Ages, European artists have used tapestry weaving to produce unparalleled masterpieces, such as carpets, upholstery fabric, table rugs, and, of course, wall hangings. For every square inch of tapestry, several yards of yarn must be intertwined, resulting in a concentration of color that naturally lends itself to detailed visual imagery. The average

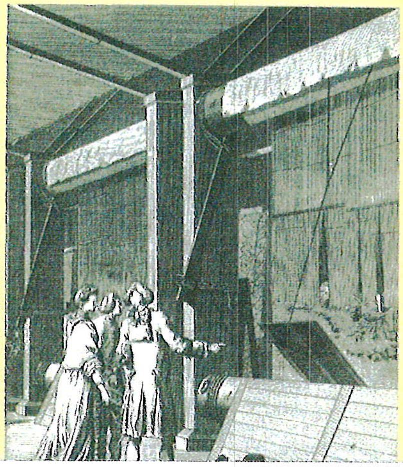


*Illustration 2. An eighteenth-century haute-lisse, or high-warp loom, at the Gobelins workshop. From* ***L'Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*** *of Denis Diderot.*

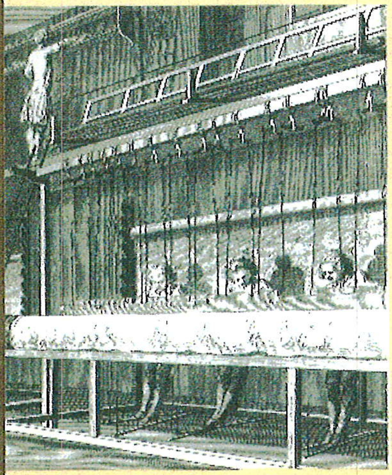


*Illustration 3. An eighteenth-century basse-lisse, or low-warp loom, at the Gobelins workshop. From L'Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers of Denis Diderot.*

10-by-10-foot tapestry can have about 15 miles of weft in it. With their naturally dense construction of wool, silk, linen, and cotton yarns, tapestries have long been used to cover walls with beautiful scenes that insulate while they adorn a room.

Two types of looms are still used to produce European tapestries. The haute-lisse, or high-warp loom, consists of two parallel wooden rollers, one above the other, between which the vertical warp is tensioned (Illustration 2). Weavers work a tapestry from the back with the aid of a mirror set in front of the completed work; weavers consult the mirror by looking through the unwoven warps to check on the design. Alternating warps are selected by hand, or with the aid of strings, to create an opening, or "shed" through which to pass bobbins of yarn. With the basse-lisse, or low-warp loom, the two wooden rollers are closer together and lie parallel to the floor like a table (Illustration 3). Foot pedals raise and lower alternating warps to create a shed. The addition of pedals enables low-warp weavers to weave a greater quantity of tapestry in the same amount of time than is possible with a high-warp loom.

For a tapestry to be woven, a small painted model must be enlarged by a tapestry designer to a full-scale image called a "cartoon." Highly skilled weavers, who often specialized in certain images, such as fruit, faces, and costumes, then laboriously copied the cartoon and added in the details. Early cartoons were mere sketches that indicated areas of color, while later cartoons became works of art in their own right. The more details that were copied from a pre-existing image, the less the tapestry reflected its weaver. The intrinsic qualities of the weave structure and the yarns were only fully understood by the weavers, and if the designers did not allow them a certain degree of artistic freedom, the resulting product more closely resembled a woven painting than a work of textile art.

## EARLY EUROPEAN TAPESTRY (11TH – 15TH CENTURIES)

The oldest known sample of European tapestry has been dated to the Middle Ages, around the early eleventh century. The first European tapestries were used to decorate churches, and so, often depicted biblical scenes and historical figures. Tapestry weaving spread across much of Northern Europe and Scandinavia, but it was usually limited to smaller objects, such as table rugs and ecclesiastical altar frontals.

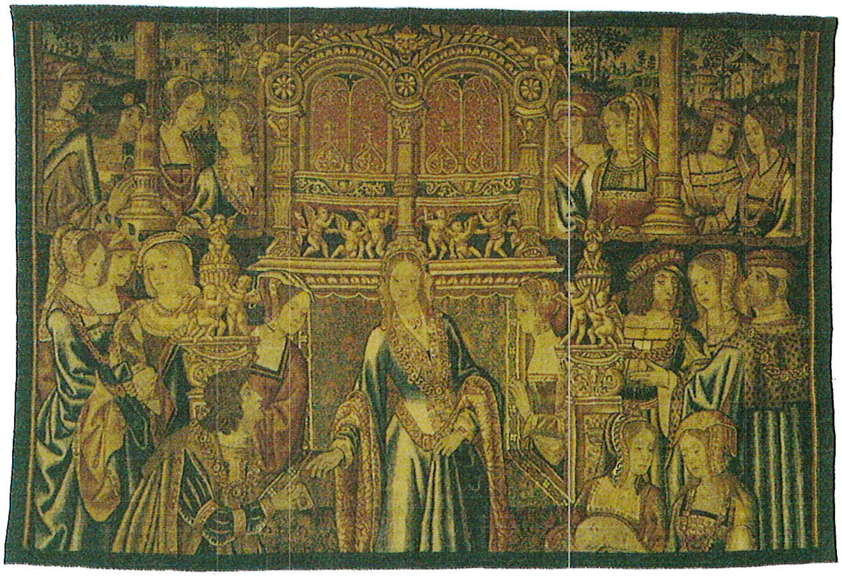


*Figure 1. **Saint Ursula Receiving the Ambassador,** Flemish, second quarter of the sixteenth century. Linen warp; wool and silk weft. 6'2"h x 9'1"w*

By the mid-thirteenth century, tapestry had become a luxury industry in Paris, reaching its height there in the second half of the fourteenth century. These pieces were woven on high-warp looms and could take many years to complete, with several weavers working simultaneously on a single tapestry. Yarn palettes were minimal, and shading was achieved with closely spaced threads of different colors – a technique called hatching. Tapestry weaving in Flanders, supported by the French and Flemish nobility, is also known to have existed in the thirteenth century. Medieval Flemish weavers were clever entrepreneurs who used their strong guild organization, along with the more efficient low-warp looms, to weave great numbers of tapestries and compete with the Parisian workshops.

Tapestry weaving continued to flourish in the Low Countries (a geographic area composed of modern-day Belgium and parts of the Netherlands and France) during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while it suffered in France after the English captured Paris in 1480. The fashion was for the walls of entire rooms to be covered with tapestries of highly decorative, minutely detailed scenes. One reason for the popularity and eventual destruction of tapestries was their very portability, which has always allowed them to be stored easily, taken from one house to another, at times spread on streets for processions, and seized as booty after battles.

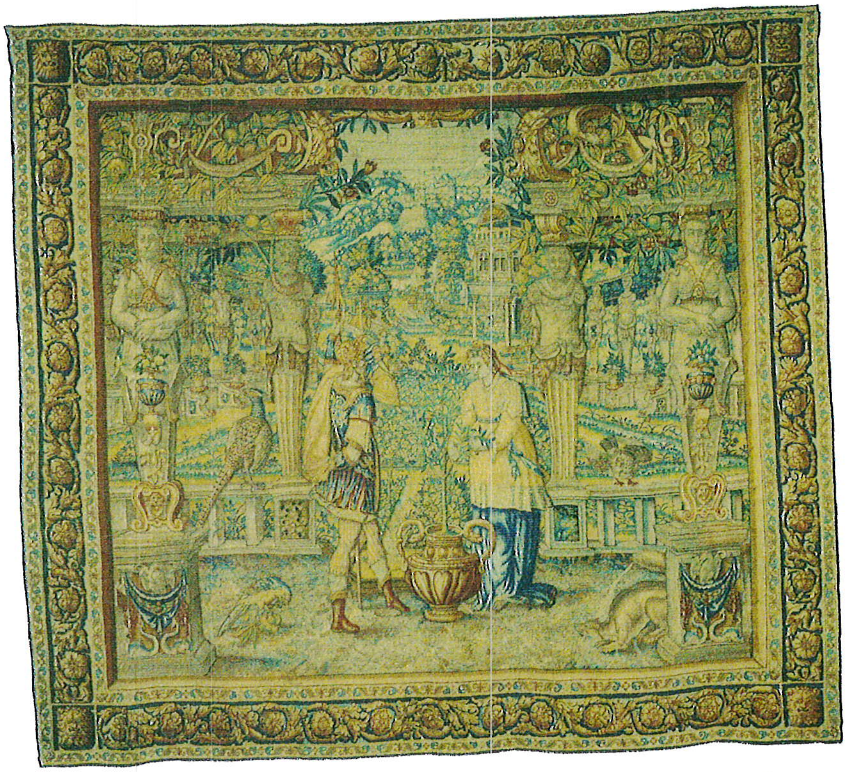
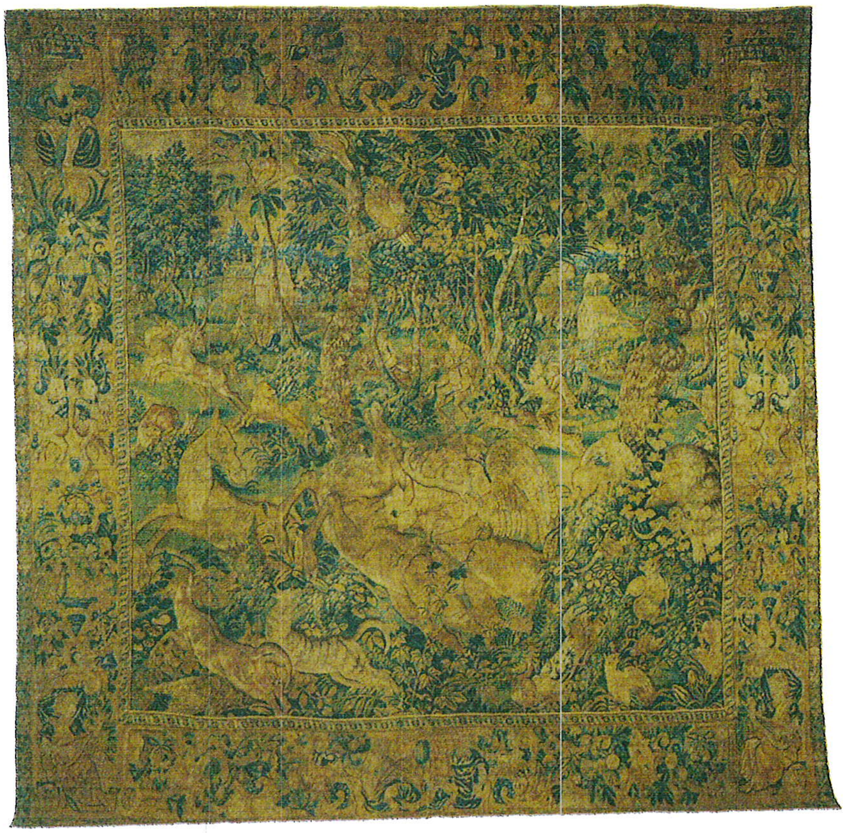
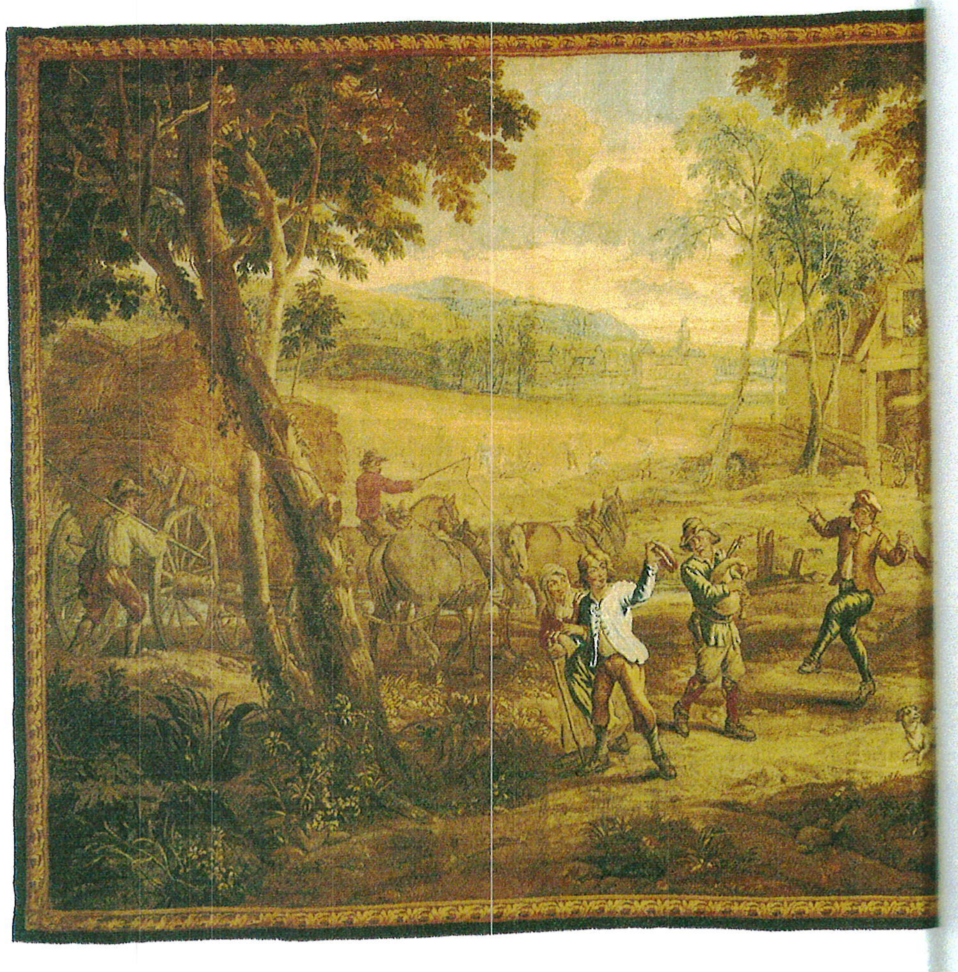


*Figure 2.* ***Vertumnus and Pomona,*** *Brussels, late sixteenth century. Wool warp; wool and silk weft. 11'2"h x 12'8"w*

*Figure 3. **The Game Park**, Flemish, late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth century. Wool warp; wool and silk weft. 10'6"h x 10'5"w*



Greater competition among tapestry weavers during the Early Gothic period led to the reproduction of popular images. More and more tapestry designs were taken from full-scale paintings or other tapestries, and a greater palette of yarns, including gold- or silver-wrapped silk thread, was developed for more realistic portrayals. A frequently seen composition of the Late Gothic period comprises a central figure in front of a throne with arcaded windows in the top corners, as seen in *Saint Ursula Receiving the Ambassador* (Figure 1). This composition originated with the work of the Flemish painter Jan van Roome, who worked from 1498 to 1521 as court painter to Margaret of Austria, and was adopted by the finest weavers of the time.



## POST-MEDIEVAL TAPESTRY (16TH – 20TH CENTURIES)

By the early sixteenth century Brussels had superseded its neighboring cities as the center of tapestry weaving in Northern Europe. Workshops such as those of Pieter van Aelst and Bernard van Orley began to produce tapestries designed by artists like Jan Vermeyen, whose cartoons for the classical story of Vertumnus and Pomona were frequently copied and adulterated by competing ateliers (Figure 2). Political strife in Flanders during the last quarter of the sixteenth century contributed to an overall decline in the quality of Flemish tapestry production. Horizon lines were raised so that figures and vegetation covered more of the image, saving on the silk used for skies. Verdures, or foliage designs, and hunting scenes became more fashionable, as seen in *The Game Park* (Figure 3). This trend continued into the seventeenth century, along with familiar mythological themes such as Vertumnus and Pomona.

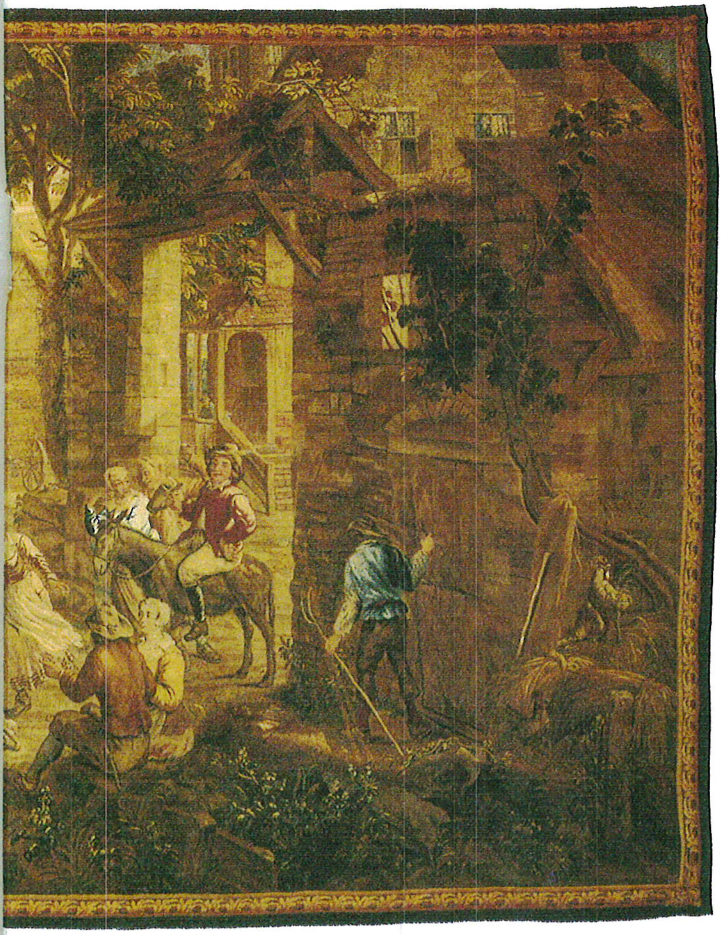


*Figure 4.* ***The Return from the Harvest,*** *Brussels, c.1750. Design after David Teniers II. Woven by the studios of Pierre and François van der Borcht. Linen warp; wool and silk weft. 9'7"h x 17'4"w*

The French tapestry industry was revived in 1607 by King Henri IV, whose goal was to establish a profitable national enterprise. His grandson Louis XIV conferred royal status on four workshops to satisfy his love of fine art. These royal tapestry ateliers were staffed in part by Flemish weavers, who were lured to France with promises of professional opportunities, royal favors, tax incentives, and immunity from national or foreign competition. When Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which had protected Protestants' rights to worship freely, hold office, and attend universities, some of the country's finest tapestry weavers were forced to flee to countries such as England, thus dealing the French tapestry industry a devastating blow.

The Flemish tapestry industry entered the eighteenth century with its own difficulties. The market was overcrowded, and the new fashion for smaller ornamental tapestries meant that upstart workshops could compete with long-established ones. Perhaps in response to this, Brussels initiated a new style of tapestries based on the peasant scenes of David Teniers II (1610-1690), court painter to Archduke Leopold-Wilhelm, governor of the Netherlands, as well as those of his son, David Teniers III (1638-1685). These tapestries were made at many workshops, including those of the van der Borcht family, who were among the most influential Brussels tapestry weavers in the first half of the eighteenth century, as seen in *The Return from the Harvest* (Figure 4). Almost every Flemish atelier began to copy these country peasant scenes, and the designs, along with verdures (Figure 5), remained popular for the greater part of a century.

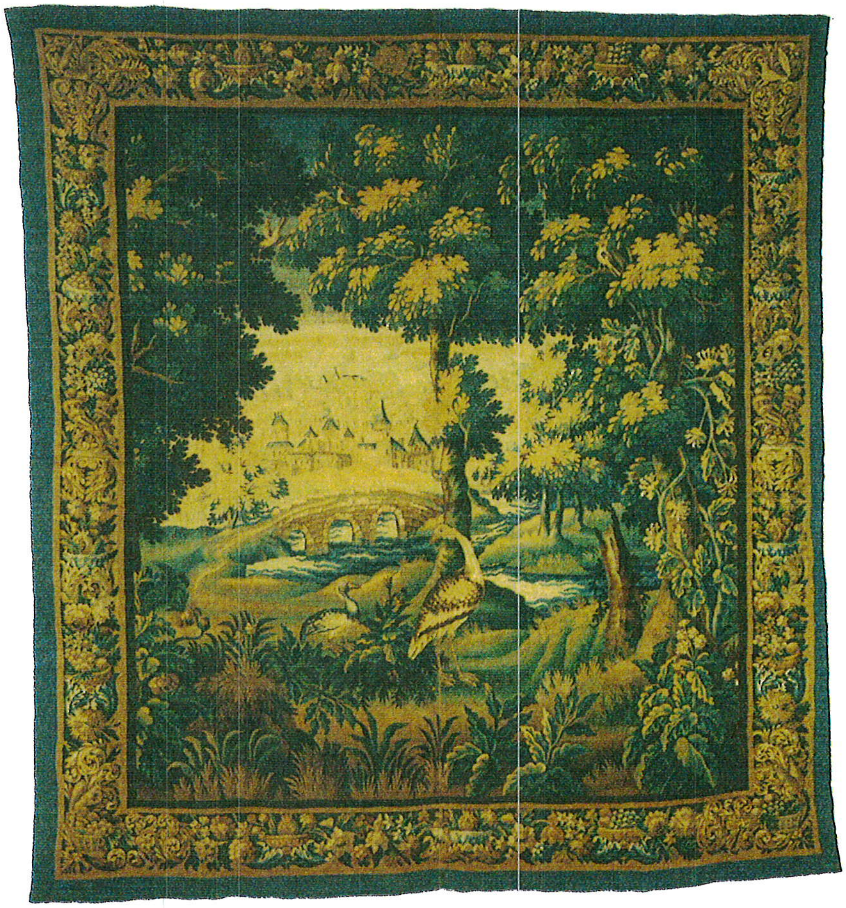
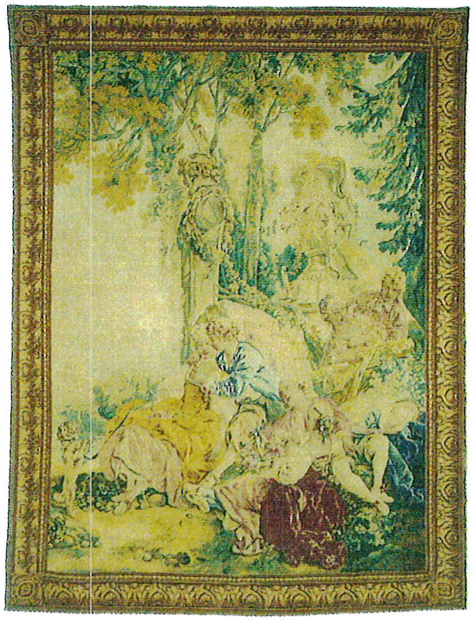


*Figure 5. **Verdure**, Flemish, second half of the eighteenth century. Wool warp; wool and silk weft. 9'7"h x 8'9"w*

It was another great eighteenth-century painter who rekindled the French tapestry industry. During the reign of Louis V, François Boucher (1707-1770) produced designs for both tapestries (cover) and upholstery fabric for the Royal Manufactories of the Gobelins, Beauvais, and Aubusson workshops, serving as the inspector at Gobelins from 1755 to 1770. Boucher's minutely detailed, intimate scenes of courtly and godly love were ideal for the new bourgeois class who entertained in their small urban apartments rather than in cavernous country estates (Figure 6). When the French Revolution occurred in 1789 the royal ateliers suffered a serious blow with the loss of aristocratic and royal patronage, and only a few patriotic subjects were woven. Although tapestry weaving was revived somewhat during the Napoleonic period (1800-1814), it never again became a national industry in France.

Weaving continued in Europe (Figure 7), but the cost of the materials, space, and manpower required to produce a full-size tapestry was rarely justified in this newly industrialized age. Once power looms became widely used in the early nineteenth century, imitation tapestries were produced on a small scale and in an altogether different weave structure that defies the very soul of a true hand-woven tapestry.



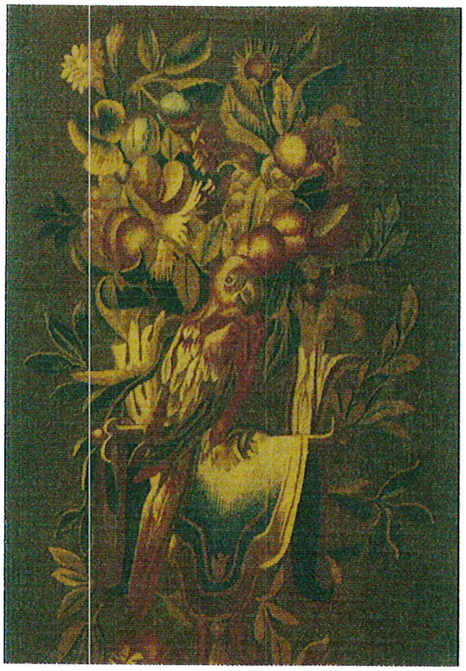


*Figure 6. **The Flute Player,** French, c.1750. Design after François Boucher. Wool warp; wool and silk weft. 10'6"h x 8'3"w*

*Figure 7. **Still Life with Bird,** Flemish, nineteenth century. Linen warp; wool and silk weft. 32½"h x 23½"w*

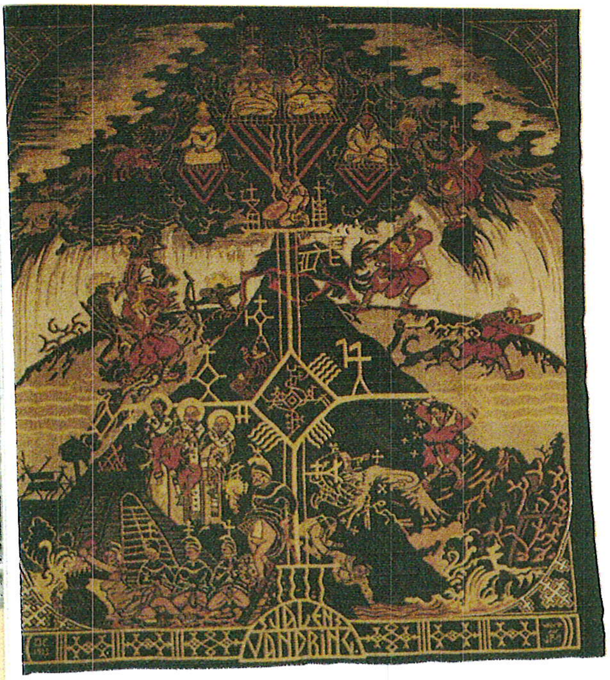


*Figure 8. Svalends Vandring (The Wandering of the Souls), Swedish, 1913. Designed by Ossian Elgström. Woven by the Handarbetets Vänner workshop. Linen warp; linen and wool weft. 7'9"h x 6'9"w*

Hand-woven tapestries have been made during the nineteenth century in the United States as well as in many European countries, including Scandinavia (Figure 8). In the early twentieth century both the Beauvais and the Gobelins workshops, along with private weavers, attempted to revive the French tapestry industry. The workshop of Marie Cultoli commissioned designs from such famous modern artists as Miró, Braque, Rouault, and Picasso. A lesser-known painter who worked with Cultoli from 1925 to 1930 was Jean Lurçat, credited by many as having single-handedly brought the artistry and intentions of the Middle Ages back to modern tapestry weaving (Figure 9). This artistic genius also designed cartoons for the Aubusson workshop. Lurçat spent most of his career at Aubusson and made it the center of French tapestry weaving to this day. Other artists, including Jean Picart-le-Doux, gathered around Lurçat, intrigued by his rhythmic arrangements, limited color palette, and use of such traditional weavers' techniques as hatching.

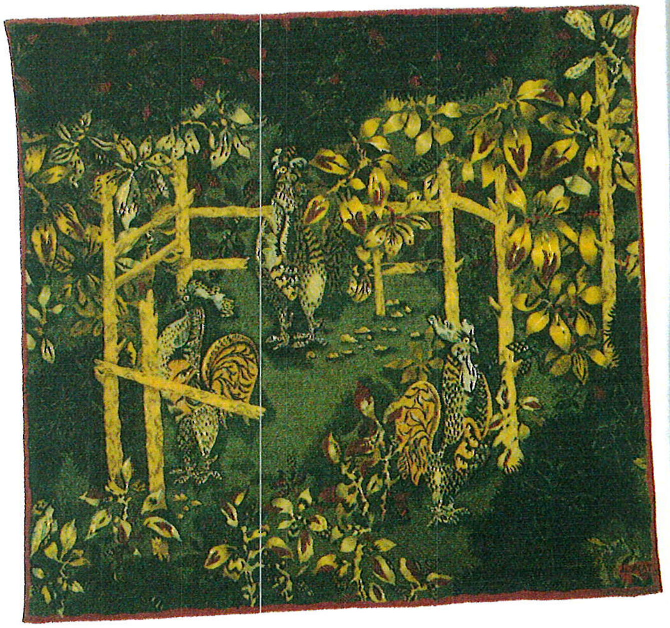


*Figure 9. Cock's Garden, French, 1939. Designed by Jean Lurçat. Woven by Pinton Frères, Felletin. Cotton warp; wool weft. 8'h x 8'6"w*

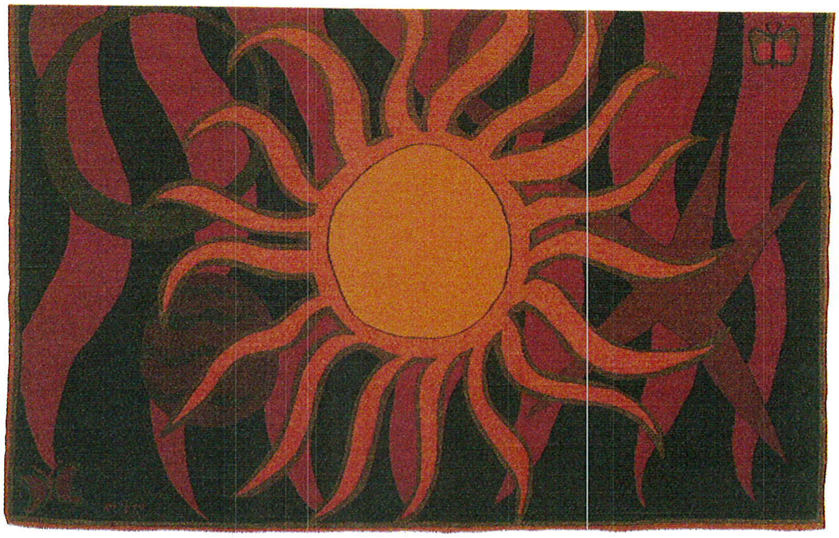


*Figure 10. **Nicaragüenses**, American, 1956. Designed and woven by the Belgian Jan Yoors in the United States. Linen warp; wool weft. 4'11"h x 7'1"w*

The success of Lurçat and his contemporaries opened the door to artists all over the world who employed the medium of tapestry for their artistic expression. Tapestries are still excellent wall decorations, being one of the few art forms that can stand up to the scale of large architectural spaces (Figure 10). Today's tapestry weavers have broken away from the old two-dimensional boundaries, creating masterpieces of form and texture. Tapestries also serve as models for fiber artists employing methods other than traditional tapestry weaving, proving the success of these monumental works as vehicles of artistic expression (Figure 11).

Today tapestry is the favorite medium for artistic weavers seeking to create vivid, textural images. Regardless of time period or design, tapestry will always be a reflection of culture and style as seen through the eyes and hands of the artists. Vojtech Blau and Simona Blau recognize the unique message that tapestries deliver, and they have dedicated themselves to tapestries' preservation and appreciation through private and corporate ownership. We are honored to have five hundred years of fine tapestries from their galleries together in this exhibition. It is our hope that through them you will gain an understanding of the unique expression of time and tradition that these works of art provide.

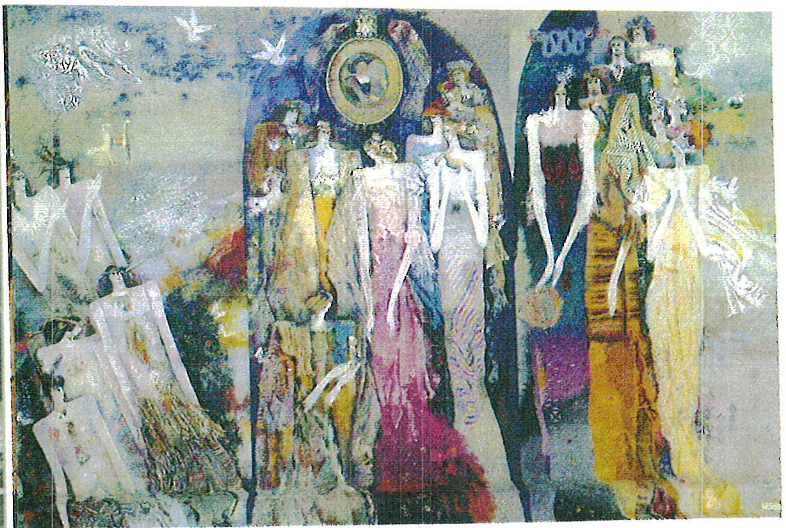


*Figure 11. The Discovery of America, Czech Republic, 1995. Designed and manufactured by Bozena Augustinova. Wool fleece pressed onto cotton ground and hand and machine stitched. 10'1"h x 13'6"w*

## THE BLAU FAMILY

For more than 35 years the competitive world of the New York City antiques market has been the home of carpet and tapestry dealer Vojtech Blau and his family. In his gallery, one can see fine Belgian tapestries dating from the pinnacle of their popularity, Chinese carpets of luxurious silk pile, and Caucasian rugs made by nomadic herdsmen. Although these pieces rival those found in museums around the world, they are all for sale to designers and collectors alike.

Blau began his career as an antiques dealer in Prague at the age of 24. He sold his first Oriental carpet to the prominent Czech dealers Joseph and Charles Zajichek, whose expertise immediately impressed and inspired him. Denied the opportunity for a formal education due to World War II, he found in these two brothers a set of skills that he wanted to learn and eventually master. Blau became a limited partner in the Zajicheks' business, which was carried out largely in secret under the socialist laws of the new Communist government, and after 15 years he decided to emigrate to the United States.

Arriving in New York City in 1962 with only a few rugs but with a great spirit for business, Blau worked in the Garment District for a year before entering the antiques market. His first big break came when a carpet he had found for $80 while combing through shops in New Jersey was sold the next week for $1,350. When his collection grew large enough, he and his first wife opened a gallery at 692 Madison Avenue. Blau began to deal in tapestries around 1970, and by 1985 the gallery had approximately 100 in stock.

Camille Myers Breeze
*Guest Curator*
December 1999

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

***Saint Ursula Receiving the Ambassador***
*Flemish, second quarter of the 16th century*
*Linen warp; wool and silk weft*
*6'2" x 9'1"*
*Figure 1*

***Vertumnus and Pomona***
*Brussels, late 16th century*
*Formerly belonging to the Barberini Palace, Rome*
*Wool warp; wool and silk weft*
*11'2" x 12'8"*
*Figure 2*

***The Game Park***
*Flemish, late 16th to early 17th century*
*Wool warp; wool and silk weft*
*10'6" x 10'5"*
*Figure 3*

***The Return from the Harvest***
*Brussels, c.1750*
*Design after David Teniers II*
*Woven by the studios of Pierre and François van der Borcht*
*Linen warp; wool and silk weft*
*9'7" x 17'4"*
*Figure 4*

***Verdure***
*Flemish, second half of the 18th century*
*Wool warp; wool and silk weft*
*9'7" x 8'9"*
*Figure 5*

***Portrait of a Girl***
*French, c.1750*
*Design after François Boucher*
*Wool warp; wool and silk weft*
*19" x 16"*
*Cover illustration*

***The Flute Player***
*French, c.1750*
*Design after François Boucher*
*Wool warp; wool and silk weft*
*10'6" x 8'3"*
*Figure 6*

All measurements are height x width. All works are the Collection of Vojtech Blau, Inc., unless otherwise indicated.

***Still Life with Bird***
*Flemish, 19th century*
*Linen warp; wool and silk weft*
*32½" x 23½"*
*Figure 7*

***Svalends Vandring***
*(The Wandering of the Souls)*
*Swedish, 1913*
*Designed by Ossian Elgström*
*Woven by the Handarbetets Vänner workshop*
*Linen warp; linen and wool weft*
*7'9" x 6'9"*
*From the Collection of Simona Blau & Co.*
*Figure 8*

***Cock's Garden***
*French, 1939*
*Designed by Jean Lurçat*
*Woven by Pinton Frères, Felletin*
*Cotton warp; wool weft*
*8' x 8'6"*
*From the Collection of Simona Blau & Co.*
*Figure 9*

***La Table aux Coquillages***
*French, c.1940*
*Designed by Jean Picart-le-Doux*
*Woven by Braquenie & Cie, Aubusson*
*Cotton warp; wool weft*
*5'8" x 4'6"*
*From the Collection of Simona Blau & Co.*
*Not illustrated*

***Nicaragüenses***
*American, 1956*
*Designed and woven by Belgian Jan Yoors*
*Based on a poem by Latin American poet Rubén Darío*
*Linen warp; wool weft*
*4'11" x 7'1"*
*From the Collection of Simona Blau & Co.*
*Figure 10*

***The Discovery of America***
*Czech Republic, 1995*
*Designed and manufactured by Bozena Augustinova, after a 19th-century Spanish tapestry of the same subject*
*Wool fleece pressed onto cotton ground and hand and machine stitched*
*10'1" x 13'6"*
*From the Collection of Simona Blau & Co.*
*Figure 11*

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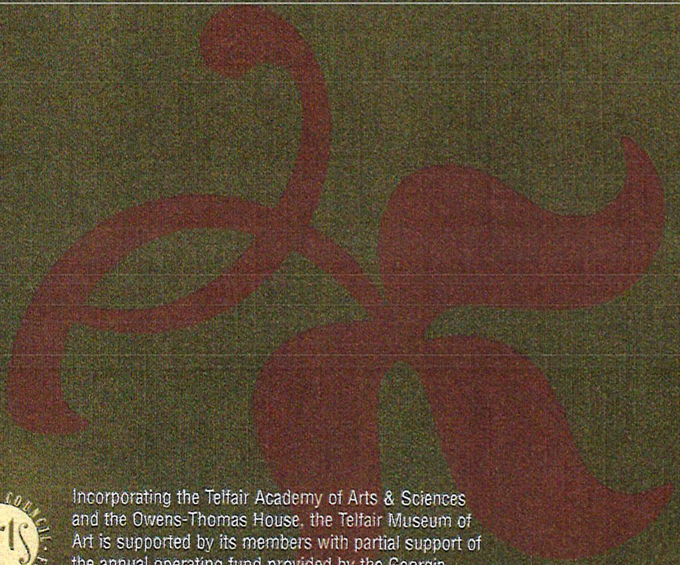

Incorporating the Telfair Academy of Arts & Sciences and the Owens-Thomas House, the Telfair Museum of Art is supported by its members with partial support of the annual operating fund provided by the Georgia Council for the Arts through the appropriations of the Georgia General Assembly and by Chatham County.