

A SET OF ENGLISH EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TAPESTRIES

THE closing years of the seventeenth century witnessed the dissolution of the Mortlake tapestry manufactory which had been founded by James I in 1619.

During these last years, which had involved financial losses, most of the weavers had dispersed and except for those who joined the Great Wardrobe their subsequent history is not clear. The Great Wardrobe, although new tapestries were woven there, was created primarily for the repair and storing of the royal collection. But after its removal in 1685 to offices in Great Queen Street, Soho, it achieved great fame through the excellent tapestries produced there. In 1689 a certain John Vanderbank (variously spelled) was put in charge and it is his name that has shed the greatest lustre on the workshop. According to Thomson¹ he was perhaps a son of Peter Vanderbanc, a native of Paris, who came to England in 1674 and who attained some fame as an engraver. John Vanderbank, many of whose tapestries are signed and hence known, remained in charge of the Soho workshop until his retirement in 1727. Among his best known works are a set of the Elements copied from the designs of Lebrun for the Gobelin manufactory, and a set based on designs of Chinese lacquer work, of which the most famous are four panels made for Elihu Yale and which became after their sale in 1924 the property of Yale University.

There is another important set of tapestries signed by Vanderbank heretofore unpublished and now in an American private collection; these form the subject of this article. They are a set of three tapestries belonging

¹Thomson, W. *Tapestry Weaving in England*, p. 139.



PLATE I

TAPESTRY: VENUS AND VULCAN WITH CUPID ARCHERS. ENGLISH, EARLY XVIII CENTURY, MANUFACTORY OF JOHN VANDERBANK. FROM THE COLLECTION OF MRS. HARRISON WILLIAMS, NEW YORK.

to Mrs. Harrison Williams of New York. The series, which represents Venus and Cupids, has been described by Marillier² in his recent book, but apparently the set owned by Mrs. Williams is not known to him. The series was apparently woven many times, but according to the list given by Marillier there exists today no set as complete as that of Mrs. Williams. The original cartoons must have comprised four subjects: *Venus and Vulcan with Cupid Archers*; *Adonis and the Sleeping Venus*; *Nymphs Clipping the Wings of Cupids*; and *The Toilet of Venus*. Mrs. Williams' set includes all but the last, *The Toilet of Venus* (Pls. I, II, III).

It is known that the designs for these tapestries are based on paintings by a pupil of the Carracci, Francesco Albani of Bologna (1578–1660). The set was apparently first woven in Brussels and then copied by the English manufactory, as there exists a set of four pieces at Houghton Hall,³ Norfolk, signed J. de Vos, and in the Krupp von Bohlen⁴ collection at Essen is a set of three (*Venus and Vulcan*, *Nymphs Clipping Wings of Cupids*, and *Venus and Adonis*), without borders but attributed to Jean François Van den Hecke of Brussels. The Krupp von Bohlen set differ only in the smallest details from that of Mrs. Williams except in *The Nymphs Clipping the Wings of Cupids* which in the Krupp von Bohlen piece is incomplete. It is remarkable that the English tapestries were copied so faithfully from the Brussels originals in those photographless days. In answer to this, Mr. Marillier made an interesting discovery which was published in the Burlington Magazine for June, 1929. The discovery consisted of four small oil paintings (at Messrs. Ackermann of Bond St., London) which illustrate the same scenes as the set of tapestries. They were found in England, so it has been assumed that if they were in England in the eighteenth century they may have been the source from which the cartoons for the English tapestries were prepared⁵.

These small paintings were themselves probably made from paintings by Francesco Albani and somewhat rearranged to make them adaptable as tapestry cartoons. Among Albani's original works the closest analogies to the small Ackermann paintings are a set of four tondos now in the

²Marillier, H. C. *English Tapestries of the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 115–120.

³*Op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁴Kumsch, *Wandteppich im Hause Krupp von Bohlen*.

⁵Marillier, H. C. *English Tapestries of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 115.



TAPESTRY: ADONIS AND THE SLEEPING VENUS. ENGLISH. EARLY XVIII CENTURY, MANUFACTORY OF JOHN VANDERBANK. FROM THE COLLECTION OF MRS. HARRISON WILLIAMS, NEW YORK.

Borghese Gallery, Rome. They represent the same subjects and in the case of the *Venus and Adonis* (Pl. IV) and that of the *Nymphs of Diana Clipping the Wings of Cupids* (Pl. V) the analogy is especially clear. The *Venus and Vulcan* of the tapestries seems to have been a combination of the Borghese picture of that name and a picture in the Turin Gallery, *Fire*, one of a set of the Four Elements also painted by Albani.

At this point it may be well to add a short description of each of Mrs. Williams' tapestries, which may serve to make more apparent the differences as well as the similarities between the English tapestries and the paintings.

The largest of the set is the *Venus and Vulcan with Cupid Archers* which measures 10 ft. high by 14½ ft. long. On the left, against a red curtain, Venus reclines on a couch with Vulcan stretched at her feet with a hammer in his hand. Part of Vulcan and the border below was at one time cut out to accommodate the upper part of a doorway over which the tapestry must have been hung. The piece cut out has been restored to its original place in the tapestry, although the joining can still be seen. On the right is a group of cupids busy at a forge, beating arrowheads on an anvil, sharpening them on a grindstone and blowing bellows. In the center are other cupids shooting at a heart-shaped target on a tree. In the foreground a cupid washes his feet in a brook in which ducks are swimming. Overhead, three goddesses, one of them Diana with the crescent moon in her hair and a spear in her hand, are observing the scene below. In the Ackermann painting the goddesses appear against the trees over Venus, a natural arrangement in a painting, but one which would make the composition too heavy on the left side in the tapestry. The trees are filled with all manner of gay plumaged birds—especially parrots and cockatoos—which are also an addition of the tapestry cartoonist. The narrow border, similar to that of the Lebrun *Four Elements*, is composed of shells on a brown ground with a central cartouche on each of the four sides framing a landscape, and at each corner a rondel, also enclosing a landscape. This piece bears no signature.

The second piece, *Adonis and the Sleeping Venus*, measures 10 ft. high by 10 ft. 9 inches long. On the right, Venus lies asleep on some cushions, protected by a shelter formed of boughs and drapery. A cupid leads Adonis toward her. Numerous cupids playing in the trees and in the



PLATE III

TAPESTRY: NYMPHS CLIPPING THE WINGS OF CUPIDS. ENGLISH, EARLY XVIII CENTURY, MANUFACTORY OF JOHN VANDERBANK. FROM THE COLLECTION OF MRS. HARRISON WILLIAMS, NEW YORK.



PLATE IV

MARS JEALOUS OF ADONIS, BY FRANCESCO ALBANI, ITALIAN, XVII CENTURY.
BORGHESE GALLERY, ROME.



PLATE V

DIANA TRIUMPHANT. BY FRANCESCO ALBANI, ITALIAN, XVII CENTURY. BORGHESE GALLERY, ROME.



PLATE VI

SIGNATURE OF THE WEAVER AS IT APPEARS ON THE MARGIN OF THE TAPESTRY, NYMPHS CLIPPING THE WINGS OF CUPIDS (PL. III).

water fill out the composition, while overhead two more cupids fly through the air, a wind-blown scarf between them. The same arrangement of cupids may be seen in the Ackermann painting, but in the original Albani there are fewer and Venus herself is not asleep. Moreover, in the Albani painting Mars in a chariot, probably jealous of Adonis, drives across the sky in place of the two cupids with the scarf (Pl. V). This tapestry also is full of bright birds and has the same border as the first piece and is likewise unsigned.

Nymphs Clipping the Wings of Cupids, the third piece of Mrs. Williams' set, measures 10 ft. in height by 12 ft. in length. Here we see five little cupids asleep in a grove. The nymphs of Diana bend over them clipping their wings, breaking their bows and burning their quivers of arrows at a bonfire in the background. From her position in the clouds overhead Diana watches the proceedings. The Ackermann painting and the tapestry show certain differences in composition from the original Albani. These are to be accounted for by the change from a tondo to a rectangular composition. There are fewer cupids in the original painting and the bonfire is in the central background in the Ackermann painting and in the tapestry (Pls. III, V). Here again the trees are filled with a motley assemblage of pheasants, parrots, cockatoos and other birds. This piece bears Vanderbank's signature, John Vanderbank fecit in Great Queen Street, (Plate VI) on the margin below the border at the right hand side. This not only identifies the tapestries, but makes it possible to date them before 1727, at which time Vanderbank retired from the manufactory in Great Queen Street. It is not now possible to say whether this set ever included the fourth piece of the series, *The Toilet of Venus*. The publication of these three may bring it to light.

From the photographs of the set one cannot fully appreciate the charm of these tapestries. While they lack the sophistication and nuances of color to be found in Beauvais Boucher tapestries of almost the same period, they possess a freshness in their well-preserved color and an ingenuous charm in the addition of so many varieties of birds and flowers and gay little cupids that give the tapestries a liveliness that cannot be paralleled in the more studied compositions of contemporary French work.

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