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**The Troyes Manuscript:  
Technology and Design in Fifteenth-Century Tapestry**

Tina Kane

**Introduction**

The question I am considering is a general one: how were medieval tapestries designed and produced? While we know how they were woven, less is known about the design process. One of the primary sources for what we do know comes from a fifteenth-century manuscript discovered by a French scholar, Ph. Guignard, in Troyes in the mid-nineteenth century. By examining this manuscript we can see some of the elements involved in the technology and design of fifteenth-century French tapestries. We begin, then, with the manuscript itself which, for this study, I have translated from the medieval French.

The Troyes manuscript was first published in a journal in 1849-1850 and later printed as a monograph in 1851. The original author is unknown. The full title is *Mémoires Fournis aux Peintres Chargés d'Exécuter les Cartons d'une Tapisserie Destinée à la Collégiale St. Urbain de Troyes, Représentant les Légendes de St. Urbain et de Ste Cécile* ["Directives furnished to painters commissioned to execute cartoons of a tapestry destined for the basilica of Saint Urban of Troyes, representing the legends of Saint Urban and Saint Cecilia."]<sup>1</sup> The Directives is quite unique in the historical annals of tapestry, and, as a result, has been cited by tapestry historians from the late nineteenth century to the present.<sup>2</sup>

The monograph has three parts. It begins with an introduction by Guignard and is followed by two primary sources: (1) a section of excerpts from the financial records of a church in Troyes that had commissioned a set of tapestries in 1416; and (2) a complete set of instructions ("Directives") to the cartoon painters, written sometime after 1483, for another set of tapestries.

The years during which these records were written span a period of great activity in the production of pictorial tapestry in France. This period began in the previous century, in 1370, with a set of tapestries commissioned by the Duc d'Anjou in Angers, portraying the *Apocalypse of St. John* from the New Testament. It is the first set of tapestries we know of that is designed to represent a full narrative cycle based on a text, and, as such, is a model for the type of tapestries we are considering here. St. John, as Biblical author, is depicted throughout the tapestries, often in his tower at the beginning of a panel. There are remnants of script left that described the actions taking place,<sup>3</sup> which is typical of many narrative tapestries from that time. The Apocalypse Tapestries are now in the Cathedral at Angers and measure approximately 430 ft. long by 16.5 ft. high.<sup>4</sup>

The remarkably high level of technical skill and artistic sensibility in these tapestries raises the question, where did the skilled weavers come from to produce such tapestries?

The archives of the craft guilds are of little help, providing only provocative details and difficult-to-define terms.<sup>5</sup> Because of the nature of these records, the origins of European pictorial tapestry are as intriguing as they are obscure. With so much uncertain, it is particularly notable that we have, in the Troyes manuscript, detailed descriptions of the process of design and production.

## The Directives

There is no record that the tapestries described in the Directives (the written instructions on which the cartoons would be based) were ever woven. The tapestries were to be a series depicting the lives of St. Urban and St. Cecilia and were to hang in the choir of the Basilica of St. Urban in Troyes. The Directives divide the story into twenty-two episodes which were to be represented in six *draps* or tapestry panels.

Since the tapestries in question were not woven, I have selected a similar set of choir tapestries for comparison.<sup>6</sup> They hang in the Cluny Museum in Paris and are entitled the *Life of St. Stephen of Auxerre*. They were woven in the last quarter of the fifteenth century for the Cathedral of Auxerre, but it is not known where or by whom.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 1** *Arrestation et lapidation de Saint Étienne* [Arrest and stoning of Saint Stephen]. 1.69 m. x 3.9 m. Photo: Courtesy of Musée National du Moyen Age Thermes et Hôtel de Cluny, Paris.

The typical format of choir tapestries from this period can be seen in Figure 1 above. The horizon is high, there is almost no empty space, and the scenes, or episodes, are divided by either columns (referred to as *tabernacles*) or trees which often carry the coat of arms of the donors. There is a descriptive text below each scene and the most important

figures are named. The St. Stephen set contains twenty-three episodes distributed over twelve separate tapestry panels. The number of figures in each tapestry ranges from between twenty-seven to thirty-eight.<sup>8</sup> The Directives gives us a unique insight into the question Guignard poses in his introduction when he asks, "how [did] the artists arrange the figures in these immense scenes, with hundreds of characters, whose actions contain entire histories?"<sup>9</sup>

The Directives begin as follows:

*MEMOIRE pour l'ordonnance des hystoires et mistères qu'ilz seront contenus, faicts et protraicts en une tapisserie, où nottement sera démontrée, et par escript déclarée. la vie, légende et dévoute conversacion du glorieux saint Urbain, martir et premier Pape de ce nom.*

[Directives for the commission of the histories and mysteries that will be contained, made, and portrayed in a tapestry where notably will be demonstrated and by script declared the life, legend, and devout ways of the glorious Saint Urban, martyr and first Pope of this name.]

In the first tapestry, the story was meant to proceed from Urban's early life to his election as Pope and go on to show his energetic conversion of many pagans, foremost of whom was Cecilia. The remaining five tapestries were to tell Cecilia's story: her marriage and the subsequent conversion of her husband and his brother; Urban's and Cecilia's campaign to convert Roman pagans to Christianity; and the persecution and martyrdom of the two saints at the hands of the Romans.

The Troyes Directives are ninety-five pages long, calling for the depiction of hundreds of characters, which the author has garnered by working closely with five separate Latin versions of the legend.<sup>10</sup> At the end of each scene the author has composed a verse which was to be woven underneath the images explaining the events, as in the St. Stephen panel above. There were six folio copies of the Directives, suggesting to Guignard that they were intended for six painters who would be collaborating on the design.

The instructions given the cartoon designers are very specific in some instances, and in others a great deal is left to their discretion. For instance, the Directives indicate to the painters which characters will be in each scene (and which people to name); what these people are to be wearing and doing and in what sort of setting, or—as is usually the case, in what kind of tabernacle; and, finally, what the principal mystery is in each sequence. Some scenes have less precise instructions where, for instance, it is simply stated that an unspecified number of particular characters are needed, or that people are dressed either nobly or simply. Exact color is rarely indicated.

However, one thing the Directives specify most clearly is the facial expressions of the characters. In fact, these directives most resemble instructions for actors on a stage or in a film. Indeed, in the St. Urban Directives the scenes are called, in French, *mystères*, a term closely associated with medieval drama. When, for example, angels appear, which is quite

frequent, the person seeing the angel is to be shown *faisant grande admiracion en le regardant*, or "looking at him with great admiration."<sup>11</sup> Or when Almachus, the Roman provost, is to be seen threatening Christians it is directed that he should be: *faisant manière de frémir les dens ainsi que ung lyon*, or "baring his teeth like a lion."<sup>12</sup> The Directives at times are almost humorous, having a distinctive blend of naiveté and sophistication.

To get the full flavor of these Directives, we can look at one of the main scenes, the martyrdom of St. Cecilia, in its totality.<sup>13</sup> This is the principal scene in the seventh tabernacle of the fourth tapestry (in my translation):

And furthermore, for the principal mystery of this present history will be made and portrayed a domestic tabernacle in which will be the said Almachus dressed and clothed as previously, with his counselors and [other] people, as previously already described and ordered. And before him will be the said St. Cecilia, stripped naked in a large cauldron, full of water over a burning fire, and around the said cauldron will be three or four tyrants who will be in the process of continually putting wood on the burning fire, and others blowing on and feeding the said fire with great breaths. And the said St. Cecilia will be completely happy and healthy in the said boiling water, and in the attitude of rendering homage and praise to God; at which the said Almachus and his people are looking with great admiration. And in the same place will be holy Jesus Christ, as if in a cloud in the sky, making a sign of benediction upon her. All this to accomplish the truth of the text. And below these three mysteries, reduced to one history, will be written the following verse.

There follows a verse of eight lines. The next tapestry portrays Cecilia's partial decapitation and continued miraculous survival. The ease with which the miraculous and the ordinary seem casually to interact is another characteristic of the Directives and a particular charm of these tapestries.

### **The St. Magdalen Accounts**

Having considered the element of design in the Directives, we can move now to matters of technology. In his monograph, Guignard has printed a short section of extracts from the financial accounts of the Church of the Madeleine in Troyes, from the years 1416 to 1430. These extracts are a record of payments made to various people involved in the creation and production of an earlier set of choir tapestries depicting the life of the patron saint of the church, St. Magdalen. Although there are gaps in the records, they give a clear account of the various steps involved in the production. Guignard believed that the tapestry of St. Urban and Cecilia would have been produced in a similar fashion.<sup>14</sup>

The format of the records is an account book.

*Item, à frère Didier pour avoir baillié par escript l'ystoire d'un des draps de la vie  
de la Magdelaine* 10s t.

[Item, to brother Didier for having written the history for one of the hangings of the life of Magdalen, 10 sols total]

*Item, à Jaquet le pointre, pour avoir fait ou moys de novembre un petit patron en papier touchant la vie de la vie de la Magdeleine, 10s t.*

[Item, to Jaquet the painter, for having made in the month of November a *petit patron* (sketch) on paper concerning the life of the Magdalen 10 sols total]

*Item, pour le vin de la marchandise faicte ou moys de novembre 1426 par les marrigliers, frère Didier et M. Jehan Fagot, à Thibaut Climent du second drap de haute liche de la vie de Madame sainte Magdelaine, qui fut beu en disnant, auquel fut despendu pour tout, 35s 7d t.*

[Item, for the wine of the transaction made in the month of November 1426 by the churchwardens, brother Didier and Mr. Jehan Fagot, to Thibault Climent for the second piece of the high warp tapestry of the life of Madame St. Magdalen, which was drunk while talking, to which was spent for all, 35 sols 7 deniers total]

*Item, à la cousturière Poinsete, qui a assemblée les draps dont on a fait le patron dudit second drap, pour file et pour sa poine, 3s 6d t.*

[Item, to the seamstress Poinsete, who assembled the cloths on which were made the *patron* (cartoon) of the second cloth, for thread, and for her trouble, 3 sols 6 deniers total.]

*Item, à Jaquet le pointre, pour avoir fait le patron dudit second drap, par marché fait à lui, et pour le vin du dit marché, païé 115 s*

[Item, to Jaquet the painter for having made the *patron* of the second hanging, for his business, and for the wine of the said transaction, paid 115 sols]

*Item, pour le vin donné au neveu Thibaut Climent, qui a fait les draps de haute liche de la vie de Madame sainte Magdeleine, 3s 4d t*

[Item, for the wine given to the nephew (of) Thibaut Climent, who has made the high warp hangings of the life of Madame St. Magdalen, 3 sols 4 deniers ]<sup>15</sup>

In spite of gaps, we can piece together the different steps involved. The itemized accounts give us a picture of a collaboration. First there is Brother Didier, a Jacobin brother, who is responsible for organizing and writing the Directives. The records also indicate that he oversees the whole process of production. Then there is Jaquet, the painter, who produces a *petit patron* (or sketch) on paper based on Brother Didier's writings. The next phase is done by Poinsette and her chamber maid, who sew together



the heavy linen cloths (or, as they are sometimes called, the bed sheets) for the cartoon. Jaquet, the painter, assisted by Symon the illuminator, then enlarges the sketches to their full size, painting them on the seamed linen, with distemper or tempera, perhaps first drawing with charcoal or chalk.<sup>16</sup> Thibaut Climent and his nephew are responsible for the actual weaving of the tapestries. The records also give clear accounts of liberal amounts of wine drunk during discussions by Brother Didier, Jaquet, Symon, Thibaut Climent and his nephew. In fact, the wine accounts for some of the larger expenses in the process. It may have also been used as partial payment.

When each piece of tapestry is finished it is given to Poinsette and her chambermaid for lining and attaching cords for hanging. Finally, we are told that Bertram, the metal worker, makes iron hooks and fastens them to beams made by Odot, the cabinet maker, from which the six tapestries are to be hung.

For a better understanding of these steps we will now look at both a *petit patron* and a *patron*—that is, a sketch on paper and a full-scale cartoon. Fortunately, one series of sketches, or *petits patrons*, has survived from the fifteenth century for another set of tapestries (albeit of a very different style), portraying scenes from the Trojan war. They are attributed to the Coëtivy Master, and date from between 1460 and 1465. These are pen and wash drawings, rendered in chiaroscuro. The only color indications are blues and reds. They are well known and can be seen in the Cabinet des Dessins at the Louvre.



**Figure 2** *La Guerre de Troie, Combat d'Agamemnon et d'Achille contre Hector 4<sup>ème</sup> bataille vers 1465 Ecole Flamande (15<sup>e</sup> siècle); Tournai (atelier de)* [The Trojan War, Combat of Agamemnon and of Achilles against Hector fourth battle, ca. 1465 Flemish school (15th C.); Tournai (workshop of)] Louvre D.A.G. c. 24 x 36 cm. Photo RMN- J.G. Berizzi

The word cartoon, *cartone* in Italian, means "heavy paper." Use of *cartone* became common practice in the middle of the fifteenth century for fresco designs.<sup>17</sup> Tapestry and fresco cartoons were generally painted on strips of heavy paper. The *patrons* for the Magdalen tapestries were painted on linen fabric that had been joined together. A. S. Cavallo mentions that cloth tapestry cartoons were hung as a substitute for the precious tapestries, which were only viewed on special occasions.<sup>18</sup> To my knowledge, no cloth *patron* has survived from this period.

The earliest fragment of a tapestry cartoon I know of, dates from a later period, the first part of the sixteenth century. It consists of several sheets of paper which have been glued to linen. It is exhibited in the Museum of the Hôtel de Ville in Brussels, and is believed to have been painted by Pieter Coecke van Aelst.<sup>19</sup> It is of interest that there are indications of color written in Flemish on the cartoon. However it is not known if they were added when the cartoon was re-used for one of the later editions of the tapestry series which depicts episodes from the life of St. Paul. The tapestry and cartoon show St. Paul's decapitation. The tapestry shown below (Figure 4), for purposes of comparison, is also in the Hôtel de Ville in Brussels, and is a seventeenth-century edition based on Coecke's cartoon.



**Figure 3.** Tapestry cartoon  
"The Decapitation of St. Paul"



**Figure 4.** Tapestry based on the cartoon  
Photos: courtesy of "City Museum of  
Brussels-Maison du Roi"



In contrast to this lack of specification, the famous Raphael cartoons for the Vatican tapestries, painted in 1515, are very precise on details of design and color, signaling the beginning of a period of tapestry increasingly concerned with replicating painterly detail, and hence limiting the interpretive input of the weavers. Note the image on the cartoon above is reversed in the tapestry because it was woven on a horizontal loom, backwards. The strips of the cartoon were placed underneath the warp and the weavers worked from the back of the tapestry.

## Conclusion

Having examined the Troyes manuscript in some detail, we are in a position now to say something about the relationship between design and technology in medieval tapestry. Our conclusions are necessarily provisional because of the dearth of source material, but—extrapolating from the Troyes manuscript—some general statements can be ventured.

In the first place, we can discern four distinct phases in the production of tapestries: (1) directives, or written instructions; (2) *petit patrons*, or sketches; (3) *patrons*, or cartoons; and finally, (4) the weaving.<sup>20</sup> I would like to denote these phases as "technologies," since each step requires a different physical medium. That is, we move from a written narrative text to drawing with pen and wash on paper to painting on linen to the weaving of fabric. Each of these four technologies (text, drawing, full scale painting, weaving) also involves a separate stage of design. As we have seen, the narrative text designates the sequence of events as well as quite specific visual characteristics. The sketches then translate the text into image, incorporating the features required by the directive, but also adding elements of style independently. The cartoon paintings, not always painted by the same hand as the initial sketches,<sup>21</sup> add a further level of design, in rendering the sketches to scale and contributing greater detail.<sup>22</sup> Finally, to move from painting to woven fabric necessarily entails additional major design decisions, for both technological and aesthetic reasons.<sup>23</sup>

What we have, then, is a mapping of design onto technology: since each medium involves a mediation, the various stages of production are also stages of design. This close relationship between technology and design is emblematic of the high degree of collaboration that medieval tapestry production entailed—what Cavallo, in his recent publication on the Metropolitan's Unicorn Tapestries, refers to as a process of "industrial teamwork."<sup>24</sup> If we recall, for instance, the convivial sessions indicated in the Troyes manuscript where the author, the painters, and the weavers got together over wine, then we can easily imagine how questions of design might well have played a part in their discussions. In addition, the existence of six folio copies of the Directives—destined for six separate painters involved in the production of the cartoons—indicates a procedure of collaborative design. But whether design was always directly collaborative or not, the Troyes manuscript at the very least provides clear evidence of a sophisticated system of collaboration in the production of tapestry.



**Figure 5** *La translation des reliques à Constantinople: l'embarquement. Tenture de St. Etienne, Brussels vers 1500* [Relics are taken to Constantinople: the departure. Tapestry of St. Stephen, Brussels, ca. 1500] 1.78 x 5.73 m. Photo: Courtesy of Musée National du Moyen Age Thermes et Hôtel de Cluny, Paris

That said, there is a further conclusion I think we can draw. The initial impulse for many tapestries of this period comes from text, and we cannot fail to notice the importance given to the role of text or script. We could think of text as a design element in tapestry, but its primary role is didactic. The tapestries were meant to instruct, as well as delight and inspire the viewer, and the texts were part of that teaching process. The prevalence of script in the tapestries takes us back, of course, to the Directives, where specific indications were given about the use of text. The Directives were themselves narratives, and this centrality of narrative in such tapestries could be said to reflect the extraordinary authority of the text in medieval society in general. If it was written, it was true. Given this high valuation of text, the fact that tapestry could so readily accommodate legible text in its design underwrote tapestry's importance as high art. The Troyes Directives remind us that, in this period, tapestry which begins in text never loses sight of it. We might say that in this period of medieval tapestry text and textile come full circle, as the etymology of the word "text" suggests: it derives from the Latin "textum," meaning "a woven fabric."

## §

## Endnotes

- 1 Ph. Guignard, *Mémoires Fournis aux Peintres Chargés d'Exécuter les Cartons d'Une Tapisserie Destinée à la Collégiale Saint-Urbain de Troyes Représentant les Légendes de St. Urbain et de Cécile* (Troyes: n. p., 1851). Originally published as an article in *Mémoires de la Société d'Agriculture, des Sciences, Arts et Belles-Lettres du Département de l'Aude*, 15 (1849-1850), pp. 421-534.
- 2 Eugène Müntz, *A Short History of Tapestry, From the Earliest Times to the End of the 18th Century* (London: Cassell & Co., Ltd, 1885). W. G. Thomson, *History of Tapestry, From the Earliest Times until the Present Day* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906). Fabienne Joubert, *La Tapisserie* (Typologie des Sources du Moyen Age Occidental, Fasc. 67, B-I B.4) (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1993).
- 3 Francis Mucl, Antoine Ruais, Christian de Mérendol, and Francis Salet, *La Tenture de l'Apocalypse d'Angers* (Nantes: Cahiers de l'Inventaire, 1987), p.57.
- 4 Mucl, et al., *La Tenture de l'Apocalypse d'Angers*, p.57.
- 5 Joubert, *La Tapisserie*, p. 24.
- 6 Joubert also suggests this similarity. See Joubert, *La Tapisserie*, p. 41.
- 7 Fabienne Joubert, *La Tapisserie Médiévale au Musée de Cluny* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1987). Paperback edition, 1994, p. 37.
- 8 Joubert, *La Tapisserie Médiévale au Musée de Cluny*, p. 36.
- 9 Guignard, *Mémoires*, p. 4.
- 10 Guignard, *Mémoires*, p. xiv.
- 11 Guignard, *Mémoires*, p. 18.
- 12 Guignard, *Mémoires*, p. 65.
- 13 Guignard, *Mémoires*, pp. 50-51:  
*Item, et pour le principal mistère d'icelle présente hystoire sera faict et protraict ung tabernacle domestique, dedans lequel sera ledict Almache vestu et habité comme dessus, avec ses conseillers et [autres] gens, ainsi comme dessus est ja ordonné et descript. Et devant luy sera la dicte sainte Cécile, tout nue et despouillée, dedans une grande chaudière, comme pleine d'eau sur ung feu ardent; et à l'entour de la dicte chaudière seront trois ou quatre tirans, desquels les uns seront comme faisant manière de mettre continuellement bois dedans ledict feu, et les autres de souffler et atizer ledict feu [à tous grans soufflets]. Et ladite sainte Cécile sera comme toute joyeuse et saine dedans ladite eau bouillante, faisant manière de rendre graces et louanges à Dieu: dont le dict Almache et ses gens feront grande admiration. Et à l'endroit d'icelle sainte Jésus-Crist, comme en une nue du Ciel, faisant le signe de bénédiction sur elle. Le tout pour accomplir la vérité du texte devant alégué. Et au dessous d'iceux trois mistères, réduits en une mesme hystoire, seront escripts les vers qui s'ensuyvent.*
- 14 Guignard, *Mémoires*, p. 9.
- 15 Guignard, *Mémoires*, p. X-XI.
- 16 Nicholas Mander, "Painted Cloths: History, Craftsmen and Techniques," *Textile History* 28: 2 (1997), p. 137.
- 17 Charles Dempsey, *Annibale Carracci, The Farnese Gallery, Rome* (New York: George Braziller, 1995), p. 100.
- 18 Adolfo Salvatore Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), p. 31.
- 19 Marthe Crick-Kuntziger, *Les Tapisseries de l'Hôtel de Ville de Bruxelles* (Anvers: De Sikkels, 1944), p. 25. The author speculates that the notes regarding the colors were added for a later edition of the tapestry. She believes that the cartoon was possibly not drawn for the first edition, but for one of the later sets of these tapestries.
- 20 For purposes of this paper, the preparation of materials used by the weavers, the spinning and dyeing of the yarns, is considered part of the weaving stage.
- 21 Joubert, *La Tapisserie*, p. 35.
- 22 When Joubert, for instance, says "Rien ne permet de dire si toutes les 'pourtraictures' ont toujours été aussi élaborés que celles-ci [sketches]," [there is no evidence that all *pourtraictures* have always been as elaborated as these] we can infer that, in at least some cases, the specificity of design is even more a feature of the cartoons than of the sketch or modelli. See Joubert, *La Tapisserie*, pp. 34-35. In addition, Cavallo notes that cartoons were often hung in lieu of the tapestries (which were only brought out for special occasions); we can therefore assume that at least those cartoons were more highly detailed. See Cavallo, *Catalog*, p. 31.
- 23 One reason why this would be so is the fact that, as Joubert argues, no matter how detailed the cartoons, the weavers' contribution would remain significant ("et, de toute manière, leur part d'interprétation reste sensible"). She goes on to note the example of the Apocalypse Tapestries, which are very different in execution from the illuminated manuscripts which provided the models. Joubert, *La Tapisserie*, p. 34. The technological requirements of weaving would also affect certain design features, since the grid pattern of warp and weft is structurally different from the fluidity of paint on linen. More importantly, though, medieval tapestry did not emphasize the reproduction of decorative image in a painterly fashion as did later periods of tapestry, and therefore the exact rendering of the painted image would not be the governing factor.
- 24 Adolfo Salvatore Cavallo, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), p. 91.