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**From Paint to Wool:
Artist-Weavers at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop**

Tina Kane

Introduction

This paper considers the relation between painting and contemporary tapestry. I will be asking the question: does the translation of a painting into a tapestry accomplish something more, categorically, than would the painting on its own? As we will see, this question suggests another, larger one: did tapestry emerge in the twentieth century as an authentic, original artform in its own right?

For years tapestry was considered a mere decorative accessory to painting, in part, because the artist, the designer, did not participate directly in its actual production. In an attempt to redress this prejudice, a model of collaboration between artist and weaver evolved during the last century. This collaboration put the weaver on equal footing with the artist in the interpretive process. Now we may ask, how successful has that collaboration been? And moreover, has tapestry weaving changed significantly as a result? To address these general questions more specifically, I will focus on one workshop, the Victorian Tapestry Workshop (or VTW) in Melbourne, Australia.

The VTW is one of only a few successful tapestry workshops operating today. It was set up in 1976 on the initiative of the state government of Victoria through its ministry for the arts. The previous year, Archie Brennan, then Director of the Dovecot (now the Edinburgh Tapestry Company), had advised on the feasibility of establishing a workshop in Melbourne, and, upon his recommendation, Belinda Ramson came from the Edinburgh College of Art to train weavers. Accordingly, the VTW began operation.

Although there had never been a tapestry tradition in Australia, one of the elements contributing to the establishment of the Workshop in Melbourne was the fact that Australia is a wool producing country. Yarns suitable for tapestry have been designed and spun for the VTW. They use a worsted yarn in 3/20's count from a Corriedale crossbreed fleece, dyed on the premises with Ciba Geigy dyes in a palette of 371 colors.¹

But the more important reason for setting up a tapestry workshop in Australia had to do with the lively artistic community there and the historically strong interest in the visual arts. This created an atmosphere in which it was possible to obtain financial assistance from the government, which continues, in part, to support the Workshop. In the past twenty-five years it has produced over 250 tapestries for both private and corporate clients. It has been directed since its inception by Sue Walker whose administrative skills and artistic vision have been central to the Workshop's survival and success.

The Workshop's policy is to hire weavers who have been trained as artists, with the idea that this will facilitate collaboration between the artists who design the tapestries and the

weavers who work with those designs. This policy may sound uncontroversial, even commonsensical, but in fact it points to a long-standing question about the extent to which weavers actually interpret or "translate" an original work of art. To understand this we need to consider the historical context of the issue. Have tapestry weavers traditionally been active collaborators?

Cartoons

In 1854, William Morris, visiting the Gobelins Tapestry Workshop, remarked, "It would be mild to say what they [the weavers] do is worthless,...a more idiotic waste of human labour and skill it is impossible to conceive."² And in 1886 Jules Guiffrey, soon to become Director of the Gobelins himself, complained that, "By making the interpreter [the weaver] slavishly copy their paintings ...the artists reduce the weavers to an insipid and inferior role ..."³ Guiffrey and Morris were not alone in thinking that by the second half of the nineteenth century, and even earlier, the art of tapestry was in trouble.⁴

Is Guiffrey's complaint that the weaver had become no more than a skilled copyist valid? By looking at the format of the design, or cartoon, that the weaver was given, we can determine to some degree the extent to which the weaver, historically, either merely copied or actively collaborated. This can be gauged to some extent by the amount of information given to the weaver in the cartoons.

A cartoon is a full scale drawing or painting of an original design. Depending upon whether the loom was horizontal or upright, the cartoon was placed either under the warp or behind the weaver (in which case the weaver viewed it in a mirror). The degree of information given to the weaver in the cartoon changed significantly over the last five centuries. Before making the cartoon, drawings or paintings referred to as *modelli* were made.

In the Middle Ages, when Western European tapestry flourished, *modelli* for tapestries were line drawings with light color washes. There is not great deal of specific detail, but instead, a general outline indicating iconographic content, figure groupings, and narrative text. The only examples we have from the fifteenth century can be seen in the Louvre. They are for a series of tapestries about the Trojan War.⁵

One of the few surviving early cartoons we have is for a sixteenth-century tapestry which depicts the life of St. Paul. It is on display in the *Maison du Roi* in Brussels and consists of a chiaroscuro tempera painting on strips of heavy paper. There are some indications regarding color.⁶ However, the weavers were probably responsible for further decisions about color and other details, perhaps in collaboration with the artists.

This format changed dramatically in 1515 when Pope Leo X commissioned Raphael to paint cartoons for a set of tapestries called *The Acts of the Apostles* for the Sistine Chapel. [See Figure 1] These cartoons resemble finished paintings much more than do the sketchier ones for the St. Paul tapestries. Archie Brennan points to the Raphael cartoons

as "the first step towards the painted cartoon where every detail was drawn and painted in final form."⁷ This increase in information reduced the interpretive role of the weaver.

The Raphael tapestries set a far-reaching precedent. The role of the painter subsequently became more important in the production of tapestry, replacing the anonymous artists and craftsmen of the Middle Ages. The designer of *The Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries, for instance, is unknown. As oil painting became more valued in the High Renaissance, tapestry followed suit by becoming increasingly painterly.

During the next several centuries tapestry models and cartoons continued to resemble finished paintings. This practice of giving weavers detailed cartoons gradually resulted in reducing the weaver to a skilled copiest, which contributed to the situation lamented by Guiffrey and Morris.

William Morris's response to what he called an "idiotic waste of human labor and skill" was to start his own tapestry studio at Merton Abbey in 1881. In attempting to revive the art of tapestry, Morris used a different format for tapestry cartoons. First the artist made a small sketch of figure groups, often copied from medieval or renaissance tapestries. Then the sketches were photographically blown up to full scale. Foreground and background details were traced from a stock of previous images done by the artists. The photographic cartoons were given to the weavers who combined them with the tracings.⁸

To what degree were the weavers active collaborators at Merton Abbey? Morris says, "a considerable latitude in the choice and arrangement of tints in shading, etc. is allowed to the executants [the weavers] themselves who are, in fact, both by nature and training artists, not animated machines." Certain details, flowers in particular, were copied from nature at the loom.⁹

In France, in 1933, in another attempt to revive tapestry, Marie Cuttoli ordered cartoons from modern artists including Leger, and Jean Lurçat, to be woven at Aubusson. The weavers were given oil paintings which they copied. The complaint about this experiment, in the words of one tapestry historian was "... [that] from a distance it was impossible to distinguish the painting from the woven replica, which amounted to the very negation of tapestry."¹⁰ However, despite this criticism, interest in tapestry was revived and it opened the way for Jean Lurçat to, in his own words, "spread the tapestry bug all over the world."¹¹

Lurçat also believed that, "Tapestry should not be a copy of a picture but a creation in its own right."¹² As a result of this conviction, he preferred a cartoon that was a partially painted and encoded outline.¹³ The code of numbers and letters written onto the cartoon corresponded to a selection of dyed yarns, called a "rosary," which was given to the weavers. The weavers then matched the numbered color yarn to the numbered element of the design on the cartoon.

Archie Brennan, while Director of the Dovecot Tapestry Studio, turned the weaver into a more active artistic collaborator than did either Morris or Lurçat by having the weaver, not the designer, make the cartoon. The cartoons were tracings, "precisely detailed line drawings in which each tiny patch of 'discrete' colour in the original was rendered by its outline."¹⁴ The same format is now used by VTW weavers. [Figure 2]

Collaboration

To understand the significance of the weaver's current collaborative role, we will look at the steps involved in producing a specific tapestry. In the early 1980's the VTW was commissioned to weave a monumental tapestry, measuring approximately 30 X 65 feet, for the new Parliament House in Canberra.

It was designed by the Australian painter Arthur Boyd at his property, "Shoalhaven," after which the tapestry is named. The original painting was about 5 X 15 feet. Boyd's model is not much different from post-renaissance models in that it is a finished painting. But it is translated into a new image, a black and white line drawing, a map of the original, by the weavers when they make the cartoon. The weavers do this by tracing from the painting onto acrylic sheets for photographic enlargement. Andrea May, a VTW weaver, says of this procedure: "Making a cartoon is one of the most crucial and decisive moments in the interpretive process. Drawing a cartoon for tapestry involves a continual move towards the essence of the image. The cartoon anticipates the transformation of a work into a new medium, mediating the gap between the translation and the original."¹⁵

After the tracing has been blown up to full scale, the weavers ink the design onto the warp. The cartoon is hung on a board behind the warp which can be pulled forward when needed for closer reference. Samples are then woven to establish a palette, in partnership with the artist. I should add that Boyd, like many of the artists who work with the VTW, was consulted at every step in the interpretation of his painting into tapestry.

The VTW uses only upright looms. Most tapestries are woven from the front, displaying the image as it will be seen when the tapestry hangs. *Shoalhaven* was woven in four sections over five years. When the tapestry was installed the four separate pieces were attached with velcro strips.

By comparing the woven and the painted image one sees the weavers translating the texture of the paint as part of the design. In some cases this actually becomes an important element. There are many examples of this in the VTW's portfolio. The Australian watercolorist Mary MacQueen's paintings have been woven to represent the appearance of watercolor washes. John Olsen uses wet on wet paint and this also has been translated into wool. [Figure 3]

Another good example of imitating paint can be seen in a Gareth Sansom tapestry called *Family Trust*. Sansom challenged the weavers to reproduce a variety of paint textures.

When the Workshop first approached him to prepare a design for a tapestry he said that he was not interested. "I just didn't think it could work," he said. "My painting is so grungy, so thick and thin, scraped and sprayed that I didn't think it could be adequately portrayed in the medium of tapestry...I tried all the stylistic tricks I'd ever done in painting trying to make it impossible... But they absolutely pulled it off. They worked out how to do drips, spots, stains, spray. Family Trust is three times larger than the painting I gave them...it's very powerful, fantastic."¹⁶

Given their remarkable skills, these weavers could weave practically anything. For example they have interpreted a nearly photo-realist watercolor botanical painting by Celia Rosser, Australia's premier botanical artist, into tapestry. They have also translated an asymmetrical painting by Frank Stella into an asymmetrical tapestry. The workshop has worked from other graphic art including collage and photography. There have also been many collaborations with contemporary Aboriginal artists.

Using tapestry to mimic artists' materials is not unique to the VTW. Other examples of this can be found in the work of both the Edinburgh Tapestry Company and the West Dean Tapestry Studio in England. For example, in the nineteen eighties West Dean completed a collaboration with the artist Henry Moore. The weavers learned to translate, among other textures, the appearance of wax crayon, charcoal, and watercolor on blotting paper into tapestry.¹⁷

We have been trying to gain a clearer understanding of the success of a "collaborative model."¹⁸ The VTW and other workshops have carried forward the legacy of Lurçat and Brennan, who wanted to free the weaver from the role of copyist. This creative independence is expected to be evident in the quality and vitality of the final product. Most viewers would agree that these tapestries exhibit vitality and that they are impeccably woven.

Freeing the weaver from copying was also to free tapestry from being a mere copy of a painting, to allow it to be something in its own right. But while weavers from modern workshops are not copying paintings, in mimicking paint and other artist's media they produce tapestry that is super-mimetic. While I do not believe there is anything objectionable about wool emulating paint, there is something ironical in this development.

Freeing the weaver to interpret contemporary images has also caused fundamental changes in how tapestries are woven. This could constitute a separate study. I will discuss only one of the most significant changes which is the diminished use of hatching. Hatching is a technique used in drawing, engraving and tapestry to indicate shading. Practically every tapestry woven between the fourteenth and twentieth century in Western Europe used this technique. Laying in parallel rows of alternating colored weft to indicate lines of shading and color shift was particularly suited to the grid of the warp and weft of tapestry weave. It was tapestry's signature and kept tapestry clearly within the idiom of textiles. Hatching is now rarely seen in modern tapestries. It has become

the exception, instead of the rule. Contemporary weavers, instead of using hatching, often mix multiple colored yarns on bobbins to indicate color change.

There have been other technical changes as well, some of which are due to economic conditions. The rarity of contemporary tapestry workshops is an indication of how difficult it is to support such a labor intensive industry. The VTW's support from the government has been crucial to its economic success. It is notable that today in the United States there is no full scale tapestry workshop.

Conclusion

We have been considering the collaborative model of tapestry design. By following the evolution of the tapestry cartoon we saw how, historically, the role of the weaver in the production of tapestry has changed over the past six hundred years from some degree of active participation in the Middle Ages to skilled copyist after the Renaissance and then again to active collaborator in the twentieth century. We have also seen examples of the results of the collaborative model as it is practiced at the VTW.

Perhaps now we can draw some provisional conclusions concerning our initial questions. To what degree has the collaboration between contemporary artist and weaver enabled tapestry to emerge as an authentic art in its own right, independent of the painting upon which it is based? And, do some of these tapestries accomplish something categorically more than would the painting on its own (aside from size and mobility)?

On the one hand, tapestry is still a neglected art. It would be difficult, for example, to find a contemporary tapestry hanging in any major museum in New York City. But is this neglect the result of the old prejudice against tapestry as decorative accessory? Or is it valid judgment upon the irrelevance of the art? By sticking so close to paintings and artists' images, has contemporary tapestry become a hybrid, neither one thing nor another? Or, on the other hand, has tapestry been transformed from a dull, derivative medium into a dynamic, exciting art form with its own aesthetic language?

My conclusion is that workshop tapestry has been revitalized in the last century as a result of the collaborative model. [Figure 4] I do not believe that the VTW, or other workshops, could have enjoyed the success they have had without this change. And yet there are still questions that tapestry weavers and designers must ask about the relationship of paint to woven fabric. One of these questions is, has tapestry's autonomy been compromised by its close relationship to painting and other graphic art?¹⁹

However, putting these questions aside, if we consider the history of tapestry as a continuum, we can see this ancient art has once again reinvented itself, not only surviving a threat, but thriving in the process. At times in this reinvention it has found a way to fulfill the aim of the collaborative transformation of paint into wool. When it does fulfill this aim, tapestry transcends mimesis to become not just a translation but a transfiguration, a reinventing of one form of art into a new form, grander and more vital.

Perhaps viewers generations ahead will come to honor some of these tapestries in the way we do now the Raphaels and the Unicorns.

Endnotes

- ¹ These yarns are sold to knitters and weavers in many countries as well as in Australia.
- ² Linda Parry, *William Morris Textiles* (London: The Viking Press, 1993), p. 102.
- ³ Jules Guiffrey, *Histoire de la tapisserie depuis le Moyen Age jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: np, 1886).
- ⁴ F.P Thomson, *Tapestry Mirror of History*. (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1980), p. 134. In 1748 Jean Baptiste Oudry, inspector of the Gobelins, bitterly complained about what he called "work of pure routine." And Thomson remarks that it was then that "Gobelins tapestries became merely woven pictures; exact and lifeless copies of the painted original."
- ⁵ Fabienne Joubert, *La Tapisserie*, Typologie des Sources du Moyen Age Occidental, Fasc. 67, B-I B.4 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1993), p. 41.
- ⁶ Marthe Crick-Kuntziger, *Les Tapisseries de l'Hôtel de Ville* (Anvers: De Sikkel, 1944), p. 25.
- ⁷ Archie Brennan, *Master Weavers, Tapestry from the Dovecot Studios 1912-1980* (Edinburgh: Canongate Publishing Ltd., 1980), p.33.
- ⁸ Parry, *William Morris Textiles*, p. 106.
- ⁹ Parry, *William Morris Textiles*, p. 105.
- ¹⁰ Pierre Verlet, *The Book of Tapestry* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), p. 119.
- ¹¹ Verlet. *The Book of Tapestry*, p.121.
- ¹² Verlet, *The Book of Tapestry*, p.122.
- ¹³ Archie Brennan, *Master Weavers*, p.34.
- ¹⁴ Harold Cohen, *Master Weavers*, p.14.
- ¹⁵ Victorian Tapestry Workshop, *Interpretations: The Woven Language of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop* (Melbourne: McKellar Renown Press, 1997), p.3.
- ¹⁶ Victorian Tapestry Workshop, *Interpretations*, p. 5.
- ¹⁷ Ann Garrould and Valerie Power, *Henry Moore Tapestries* (London: The Henry Moore Foundation, 1988), p.105.
- ¹⁸ Lawrence Knowles, "Woven Together: The Collaborative Model for Tapestry Studios," *Fibre Arts* March/April, 1999, pp. 32-41. A discussion of collaboration as practiced in three contemporary tapestry workshops: the VTW, Westdean, and the Edinburgh Tapestry Company.
- ¹⁹ *The Age*, (Melbourne, October 4, 2000), p. 11. In an article on a new tapestry, a portrait of Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, woven from a cartoon based on a digitalized photograph, the reporter says: "But it's not a painting, much as it looks like one. It's a tapestry," and later quotes the director of the National Portrait Gallery saying Dumbrell [the weaver] "is a weaver of magic [using] colors as if they were paints on an artist's palette." This is a good example of the inability to think of tapestry outside the comparative context of painting as fine art. In this instance the comments are particularly confused, as this tapestry is based on a photograph rather than a painted image. Twentieth century tapestry, in spite of the concerted effort to free itself from being seen as an adjunct to painting, has largely failed to educate or, perhaps, convince many of its viewers of its autonomy.

Figures



Fig. 1. Victoria & Albert Museum, The Royal Collection,
The Miraculous Draft of Fishes, 1515-16, (tapestry cartoon)
(after Raphael).

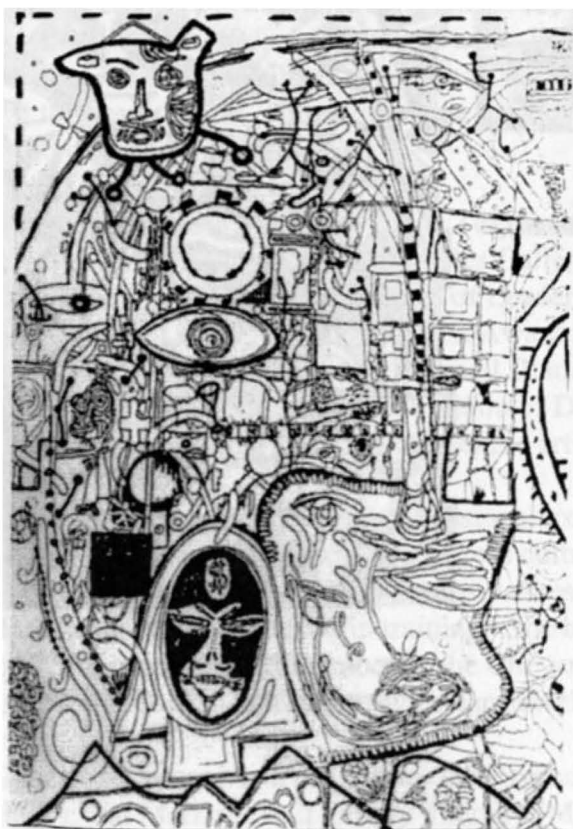


Fig. 2. VTW, Melbourne,
Family Trust, 1998,
(tapestry cartoon detail),
(after Gareth Sansom).



Fig. 3. VTW, Melbourne,
Happy Days, 1994, (tapestry detail),
(after John Olsen).



Fig. 4. VTW, Melbourne
Aotea Tapestry, 1997,
(after Robert Ellis)