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# The Fruits and Nuts of the Unicorn Tapestries

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## INTRODUCTION

The unicorn is a mythical beast with the body of a small milk-white horse, a single spiraling horn arising from its forehead, and with cloven hooves and chin whiskers like a male goat. The horn, resembling that of a narwhale, presumably had curative powers that allowed the unicorn to detoxify water. The unicorn became a popular subject in medieval art and is treated with both religious and erotic overtones. The fierce unicorn became both a symbol of the resurrected Christ and a courtly symbol of purity, grace, and love. The animal was fierce and elusive and could only be captured by a virgin who tamed the beast in her lap. Thus, the unicorn became a popular artistic subject in literature, paintings, and tapestries. There are two famous extant tapestries invol-

ving the unicorn: *The Lady and the Unicorn* (six tapestries) dating to the 1480s (Fig. 1) and now located in the Musée de Cluny in Paris, an allegory of the six senses; and *The Hunt of the Unicorn* (Fig. 2) made between 1490 and 1505 (seven tapestries, one in two fragments) located in the Cloisters in Upper Manhattan, a branch of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. *The Lady and the Unicorn* series is formal, serene, and static, while the *Hunt of the Unicorn* is naturalistic, dynamic, and spirited. Both are overwhelmingly beautiful and represent the high point of the tapestry art form. The tapestries have been discussed in a number of works by art historians including Margaret B. Freeman (1976), Adolfo Salvatore Cavallo (1993, 1998), and Elisabeth Delahaye (2007). Both tapestries incorporate a style popular in French and Flemish tapestry known as mille-

fleurs (thousand flowers) where a mass of flowering herbs and trees are included in the background giving the tapestries high horticultural interest. The plants in the Hunt series have been identified by Eleanor C. Marquand (1938) based on symbols and by E.J. Alexander and Carol H. Woodward (1941) based on botanical evidence. In this paper the fruit crops of the tapestry are reviewed and treated from a horticultural perspective.

## THE TAPESTRIES

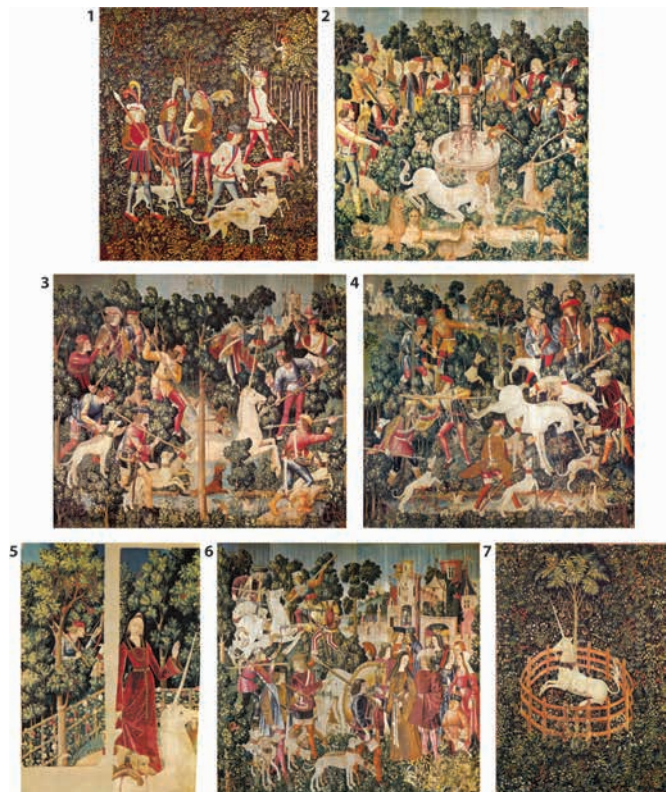
### The Lady and the Unicorn

This series of six tapestries that is considered to be an allegory of the six senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, and desire) portray an exquisitely gowned lady and her handmaiden placed between a lion and a unicorn on an

Figure 1. The six tapestries of *The Lady and the Unicorn*: (1) Sight, (2) Hearing, (3) Taste, (4) Smell, (5) Touch, (6) Desire.



Figure 2. The seven tapestries of *The Hunt of the Unicorn*: (1) The start of the hunt; (2) The unicorn dips his horn into the stream to rid it of poison; (3) The unicorn leaps the stream; (4) The unicorn defends himself; (5) The unicorn is tamed by the maiden, two fragments; (6) The unicorn is killed and brought to the castle; and (7) The unicorn in captivity.





oval carpet of flowers in the mille-fleurs style (Delahaye, 2007). The figures are serene and posed. The lion continually hoists a flag of three half-moons (the banner of the Le Viste family for whom the tapestry was created) as does the unicorn in four of the tapestries. In Tapestry 1, the unicorn kneels with his front legs on the lap of the lady. Each background includes a copse of trees including oak (*Quercus robur*), holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), sour orange (*Citrus aurantium*), and stone pine (*Pinus pinea*).

### The Hunt of the Unicorn

This series of seven tapestries can be best described by their current titles in Freeman (1976): (1) The start of the hunt, (2) The unicorn dips his horn into the stream to rid it of poison, (3) The unicorn leaps the stream, (4) The unicorn defends himself, (5) The unicorn is tamed by the maiden, two fragments, (6) The unicorn is killed and brought to the castle, and (7) The unicorn in captivity. All contain numerous signature initials (A and reverse E) connected by a cord in a bowknot indicating the tapestries were prepared for a single patron, possibly to celebrate the marriage of Anne of Brittany and King Louis XII on January 8, 1499 (Rorimer, 1942). The tapestries were not all designed by the same artist. Tapestries 2 through 6 appear to be based on paintings of a single artist and are filled with hunters and their dogs, animals, and plants, all in a natural setting, and include a glimpse of a castle, a stream, and the unicorn as a unifying element. The mass of figures and dogs are dramatically involved in the hunt and the final killing of the unicorn in Tapestry 6 is almost too horrifyingly graphic. In the same tapestry the corpse of the unicorn is transported on the back of a horse to a noble couple and their retinue who stand in front of their castle. Tapestries 1 and 7 appear to be an afterthought and the initials A and E are similar to each other but thinner than those of 2 to 6. Both tapestries are in the style of mille-fleurs with the background consisting of a carpet of flowers. Tapestry 1 does not include the unicorn and the portraits of the hunters are stiff and cruder than those in 2 to 6. Tapestry 7 contains only the unicorn, now alive, with an ornamental collar and leash enclosed in a small round corral with a single fantasy tree carrying fruits of pomegranate that stain the unicorn's body with their juice. This iconic tapestry is the best known of the series.

## FRUIT AND NUT CROPS

Eighteen fruit and nut plants will be discussed and examples will be illustrated from both tapestries as follows: small fruits (bilberry, blackberry, elderberry, and strawberry); stone fruits (cherry, peach, plum, and apricot); pome fruits (medlar and hawthorn); nuts (hazelnut, oak, stone pine, and walnut); tropical and subtropical fruits (date, pomegranate, and sour orange); and an ornamental tree (holly). Identification of spe-

cies in the Hunt Tapestry with some exceptions agree with those of Alexander and Woodward (1941) who also provisionally identified over 100 herbaceous ornamentals and some forest trees (arbutus, aspen, beech, linden, and elm) but these will not be considered here. In addition, images of each fruit will be included from a contemporary work, the *Grandes Heures d'Anne de Bretagne* (*Grandes Heures*) illustrated by Jean Bourdichon between 1503 and 1508 (<http://mandragore.bnf.fr/jsp/rechercheExperte.jsp>). These plants (237 images) have been identified in an index of *Promenade dans des Jardins Diparus* (Bilimoff, 2001 p.138-139) and can be found in a database (<http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/bilimoff>).

### Apricot

One small tree (Fig. 3A) with orange-red fruit in the upper right corner of the Hunt Tapestry 4 has been identified as apricot (*Prunus armeniaca*). Leaves are more round than lanceolate as is typical for this species. Figure 3B shows a stem bearing yellow-orange apricot fruit from the *Grandes Heures*.

**Figure 3. Apricot (*Prunus armeniaca*): (A) tree in Hunt Tapestry 4; (B) fruiting stem in the *Grandes Heures*.**



**Figure 4. Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) from the Hunt Tapestry 2.**



### Bilberry

The shrub in Figure 4 from Hunt Tapestry 2 was considered to be a plum (*Prunus domestica*) by Alexander and Woodward (1941) but the small glossy fruit is probably a berry and not a drupe and is probably bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*). The presence of a pigeon perched on the bush gives credence to this identification. Bilberry is not found in the *Grandes Heures*.

### Blackberry

A single image of blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus*) in flower is found in Tapestry 6 of the Hunt Tapestry (Fig. 5A) showing a plant climbing on a hazelnut (filbert) tree (see below). The trifoliate palmately compound leaves are serrate and accurately portrayed; the stem is thorny. The flowers show 5 petals; fruits are not shown. A blackberry is found in the *Grandes Heures* with fruit and flowers (Fig. 5B).

**Figure 5. Blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus*): (A) Hunt Tapestry 5; (B) *Grandes Heures*.**



### Cherry

Four images of the sweet cherry (*Prunus avium*) are found in the Hunt tapestries. It is the

**Figure 6. Cherry (*Prunus avium*): (A) tree in Hunt Tapestry 1; (B) shrub in Hunt Tapestry 2; (C) fruiting stem in the *Grandes Heures*.**





dominant tree in Tapestry 1 (Fig. 6A), and there are smaller bush-like forms within Tapestry 2 (Fig. 6B), 3, and 4. It is unclear if they are bicolored or merely tinged with white to represent highlighting. Solid red fruit is found in the *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 6C).

### Date Palm

In Hunt Tapestry 1 there are two images of young date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*), one of which is shown in Figure 7. Although palms could not be grown to maturity, young palms could have been grown from seed and maintained in orangeries. Dates were imported to medieval France from North Africa. There are no date palms in the *Grandes Heures*.

**Figure 7. Date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) from Hunt Tapestry 1.**



### Elderberry

The rather crude image of a tree with light blue fruit in Tapestry 1 (Fig. 8) was identified as a plum (*Prunus domestica*) by Alexander and Woodward (1941) but this is unlikely based on the compound leaves. Identification of elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) was made by Todd Kennedy (pers. commun.). This species is not found in the *Grandes Heures*.

### Hawthorn

Hawthorn trees with small white flowers have been identified in Tapestry 3 (Fig. 9A) and 6 of the Hunt Tapestry. They were identified as *Crataegus oxycanthus* by Alexander and Woodward (1941) but this name is no longer valid. The common hawthorn of Europe (*C. monogyna*) is also known commonly as mayblossom, maythorn, and haw. The spiny shrub is commonly planted as a hedge plant and the berries have some medicinal uses. Figure

**Figure 8. Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) from Hunt Tapestry 1.**



**Figure 9. Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*): (A) trees in Hunt Tapestry 3; (B) fruiting stem in the *Grandes Heures*.**



9B shows a fruiting stem from the *Grandes Heures*.

### Hazelnut

Hazelnut trees (*Corylus avellana*) are found in the Hunt Tapestry 3 and 6. Tapestry 3 contains a small tree with many nuts, and Tapestry 6 includes a very large tree with a fat, brown squirrel feasting on the nuts (Fig. 10A). The blackberry bush described above is found at the bottom of this tree. The nuts show the husk

**Figure 10. Hazelnut (*Corylus avellana*): (A) tree with squirrel eating nuts; (B) fruiting stem in the *Grandes Heures*.**



covering the seeds and are known as filberts in England. Similar fruits (Fig. 10B) are shown in the *Grandes Heures*.

### Holly

There are images of European holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) with red berries in all six of the Lady tapestries (Fig. 11A) and in the Hunt tapestries 2 to 6 (Fig. 11B), as well as the *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 11C). Fruit are considered toxic but are an important food source for birds.

**Figure 11. Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*): (A) Lady Tapestry 5; (B) Hunt Tapestry 3; (C) *Grandes Heures*.**



### Medlar

The medlar (*Mespilus germanica*) is now considered a very minor fruit, but was quite popular in medieval Europe. Medlar images are found in four of the Hunt tapestries. Three small trees are found in Tapestry 2, 3 (Fig. 12A) and 4 with small fruit showing a closed calyx. In the fragment of Tapestry 5 is a portion of a large tree with five large reddish-brown fruit (Fig. 12B) that was classified as apple by Alexander and Woodward (1941) but a close inspection of the fruit indicates that it must be medlar with a very wide calyx as shown in the inset from a photograph. Figure 12C shows medlar fruits from the *Grandes Heures*, very close to Figure 12A.



**Figure 12. Medlar (*Mespilus germanica*): (A) tree and fruit in Hunt Tapestry 3; (B) tree and fruit in Hunt Tapestry 5, right fragment, inset is photograph of fruit with open calyx; (C) fruiting stem in the *Grandes Heures*.**



## Oak

This is the most common tree found in the tapestries. In the Lady tapestries, oak trees with prominent acorns on long pedicels (Fig. 13A) characteristic of *Quercus robur* (French or English oak), are found in each of the six tapestries. In the Hunt series, oaks are found in all the tapestries except 7. In Tapestry 1 leaves are shown with galls as a result of insect attack (Fig. 13B). Fruiting shoots of oak are shown in the *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 13C).

## Peach

A single image of a peach tree is located in the right corner of Hunt Tapestry 4 (Fig. 14A). The tree contains 12 yellowish globular fruits, each showing a prominent suture, with a bowknot attached to the A reverse E initials looped around one branch. The leaves are lanceolate, typical of peach. Fruit size based on leaf length of 12-15 cm long suggests the peaches are about 6-8 cm in diameter. The trunk of the tree is suggestive of rough bark. Figure 14B shows a stem bearing peach fruit from the *Grandes Heures*. Peaches were reported in France as

**Figure 13. Oak (*Quercus rubra*): (A) fruiting tree with acorns on long pedicels in Lady Tapestry 4; (B) non-fruiting tree in Tapestry 1 of the Hunt Tapestry showing leaf galls on the leaves; (C) fruiting stem in the *Grandes Heures*.**



**Figure 14. Peach (*Prunus persica*): (A) tree in Hunt Tapestry 4; (B) fruiting stem in the *Grandes Heures*.**



early as 530 and included in Charlemagne's *Capitulare de Villis* in 800.

## Plum

A tree with dark purple fruit (Fig. 15A) from Hunt Tapestry 3 is considered to be a plum (*Prunus domestica*) and has been so identified by Alexander and Woodward (1941). A damascus plum resembling bullace with glaucous purple fruit is found in the *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 15B).

**Figure 15. Plum (*Prunus domestica*): (A) shrub in Hunt Tapestry 3; (B) Damascus plum in the *Grandes Heures*.**



## Pomegranate

There are two images of pomegranate (*Punica granatum*) in the Hunt tapestries. In Tapestry 3 (Fig. 16A) there is a small tree that is obviously a pomegranate based on the young fruit shape. In Tapestry 7 (Fig. 16B) a large fantasy tree dominates the scene of the unicorn in captivity, which is clearly a figment of the artist's imagination, but some of the fruits are split showing the seeds, clearly indicating they are pomegranates. In addition, the red juice of the pomegranate appears on the Unicorn's body (Fig. 1, Tapestry 7). The fantasy tree has been explained by the fact that the pomegranate was unknown in France in the medieval period but this is belied by the fruit in Tapestry 1 and the painting in the *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 16C). The discrepancy provides additional evidence that the artist of Tapestry 1 and 7 was different from Tapestry 2 to 6.

## Sour Orange

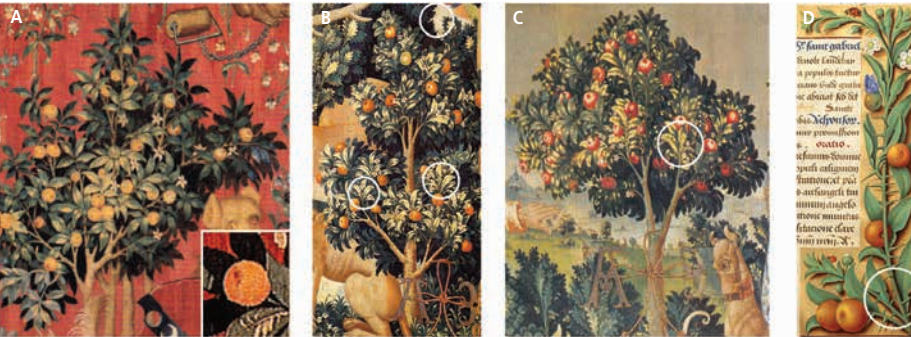
Citrus trees are found in the Lady tapestries (2 to 6), in the Hunt tapestries (2 and 4), and in the *Grandes Heures*. In all cases, fruit and flowers are shown together, a common characteristic of *Citrus*. In the Lady Tapestry 4 (Fig. 17A), the fruit is round, light yellow, and show protrusions on the blossom end (see inset from Tapestry 6) but there is no evidence of winged petioles. This image has been identified as orange by Elisabeth Delahaye (2007) but it is unclear if sweet (*C. sinensis*) or sour (*C. aurantium*). If they are in fact sweet orange it would be evidence that this type of citrus was grown in France before 1500, which is an open question. Some writers claim that the sweet orange was unknown in Europe until imported by the Portuguese in the mid 16th century after the first 1497-1499 voyage of Vasco da Gama to India (Reuther et al., 1967; Castel-Branco and



**Figure 16. Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*): (A) Hunt Tapestry 3; (B) fantasy tree in Hunt Tapestry 7; (C) *Grandes Heures*.**



**Figure 17. Sour orange (*Citrus aurantium*) with winged petioles circled: (A) Lady Tapestry 5, one of five trees in the series, all without winged petioles, note blossom end protrusion in the inset from Tapestry 6; (B, C) Hunt Tapestry 2 and 4, respectively; (D) *Grandes Heures*.**



Tito Rojo, 2009). However, Tolkowsky (1938), in his classic study on the history of citrus, is convinced that sweet oranges were known by the Romans in antiquity although lost after the fall of the empire, and were known in Italy in the 15th century. There is evidence that in that century there were oranges sweeter than the common sour orange, but were a type of sour orange, probably introduced by Genoese traders called 'Cajel', that has less acid and can be eaten when overmature (Luis Navarre, pers. commun.). In fact, Louis XI of France in 1483 requested that "citrons and sweet oranges" be imported for a holy man (St. Francis of Paula) in his care. Tolkowsky (1938) included a citrus image from the Lady Tapestry in his book (Plate LXXVII) and refers to the tree as orange but does not claim it is sweet orange despite his specific interest in this controversy (see his discussion entitled Riddle of the Sweet Orange in Chapter VIII). Based on the fruit protrusions, sour orange is the most likely choice, since it has the most conspicuous calyx structure among all citrus. Furthermore, there is a cultivar of sour orange grown for Neroli oil in France known as 'Riche Défouille' that has wingless leaves (Morton, 1987). In the Hunt series, citrus trees are found in Tapestry 2 (Fig. 17B) and 4 (Fig. 17C). The fruits are a dark orange, somewhat flat with what appears to be bumpy loosely adherent peel there is evidence of winged petioles. They were classified as *Citrus sinensis* by Alexander and Woodward (1941) but are

clearly sour orange. In the *Grandes Heures* the tree is thorny and the winged petioles are very prominent (Fig. 17D). This image was identified as sour orange by Tolkowsky (1938).

**Stone Pine**

There are five trees in the Lady tapestries (2 to 6) with drooping needle-like leaves surrounding a pine cone that must be *Pinus pinea* also known as *pin pignon* or *pin parasol* in French and Mediterranean stone pine in English (Fig. 18A). The tree has been cultivated for thousands of years in Europe. An image of stone pine can be found in the *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 18B). Stone pine is not included in the Hunt tapestries.

**Figure 18. Stone pine (*Pinus pinea*): (A) one of five trees in the Lady Tapestry; (B) stem with needles and cones in the *Grandes Heures*.**



**Strawberry**

In the Hunt series, there are six images in Tapestry 1 and seven images in Tapestry 7 of the diploid wood strawberry or Fraise des bois (*Fragaria vesca*) in the mille-fleurs background. The image in Figure 19A is very naturalistic showing trifoliate serrated leaves, tall branched inflorescences bearing 5-petaled white flowers, and small red fruits, some showing prominent achenes. The image is similar to that found in the *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 19B).

**Figure 19. Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*): (A) Hunt Tapestry 7; (B) *Grandes Heures*.**



**Walnut**

There are two images of walnut in the Hunt tapestries, one in Tapestry 1 (shoots only) (Fig. 20A) and the other in Tapestry 4 (shoots plus greenish-brown fruit, two of which appear to show split hulls) (Fig. 20B). The leaves are alternate pinnate with 7 to 9 leaflets plus a terminal one characteristic of *Juglans regia* known both as the Persian or English walnut. Fruiting shoots are shown in the *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 20C). Walnut trees were common in France and used for timber, as an edible nut, for oil, while the shells provided a hair dye.

**Figure 20. Walnut (*Juglans regia*): (A) non-fruiting branches in Hunt Tapestry 1; (B) fruiting tree in Hunt Tapestry 4; (C) fruiting stem in the *Grandes Heures*.**



**THE UNICORN TAPESTRIES AND HORTICULTURE**

Although the origin and provenance of the unicorn tapestries are obscure, they continue to fascinate. They represent an extraordinary team accomplishment of the designer, the artist, and the tapestry workshop. They illustrate



the unique activities of the nobility pursuing their life of pleasure and passion, overlaid with images of legend and nature that combine to bring to us a visual testimony of the period – richer and more complex than mere words on a page.

Historians considered these works the high point of the art of tapestry. They are extremely multi-layered both artistically and symbolically. The elucidation of their meaning is open to wide interpretation and speculation (Delahaye, 2007; Cavallo, 1993). Their allure is due to the complex issues that they depict including the life of aristocratic women, the details of a bloody hunt of a mythical beast, and courtly dress and costume – all overlaid with both religious and erotic symbolism. The extraordinary views of nature and the landscape incorporate a wide array of fauna including hunting dogs, birds, wild animals and the mythological unicorn, and diverse flora, both cultivated and wild. They are a horticultural wonder with hundreds of images – over 100 different species of herbaceous and woody plants. Clearly the diversity of garden plants was a prominent source of appeal for late medieval artists. The presence of 18 fruit and nut plants and over a hundred ornamental herbaceous plants leave no doubt as to the prominence and appeal of horticulture.

It is curious that despite the wide array of fruits and nuts common to the period, many well known ones are absent including apple, chestnut, currants, fig, grape, olive, pear, and quince. The diversity of fruit and nut crops in the unicorn tapestries is not as extensive as found in a contemporary work, the ceiling of the Villa Farnesina known as the Loggia of Cupid and Psyche in Rome. In these frescos a wider array of plants is found in festoons painted in 1517 by Giovanna da Udina, an assistant of Raphael Sanzio who painted the figures (Janick, 2012). The difference can be easily explained. The intent in the Farnesina loggia was to present a wide diversity of plants to glorify the scientific presumptions of Agostino Chigi for whom the decorations were created and who grew many of these plants in his garden called a *vividiarium*. The intent of the Unicorn tapestries rather was clearly to extol the life, wealth, and power of their sponsors. The exuberant display of plants serves both a decorative function and reflects the appeal of garden imagery to the artists and sponsors. It is intriguing that Anne of Brittany (1457-1521), twice Queen of France, and whose marriage to Louis XII in 1499 is considered to be the source of the *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries (Rorimer, 1942), had a passion for horticulture. A prayer book illustrated by Jean Bourdichon, official court painter, made for her between 1503 and 1508, contains about 340 fantastic naturalistic paintings of plants with insects (Bilimoff, 2001; Paris et al., 2006) and includes practically all the fruits and nuts found in the two tapestries.

There is no evidence for religious symbolism in the *Lady of the Unicorn* tapestries but religiosity

has been speculated to play a role in the *Hunt of the Unicorn* based on the unicorn being a substitute for Christ and in the symbolism of some of the plants chosen (Marquand, 1938; Rorimer, 1942; Freeman, 1976; Cavallo, 1993, 1998). Although some of the hundreds of plants in the tapestries were endowed with religious symbolism, it is easy to construct a religious narrative that may be more apparent than real. Rather, the emphasis on hunting, horticultural plants, gardens, dress, and pageantry extols class, privilege, and power. Gardens and gardening, especially fruit and nut plants and ornamentals as compared to vegetables, were consistently associated with the upper classes and were an important pastime of the aristocracy. No vegetable plants are found in the tapestries. The relationship of the aristocracy and gardens illustrated in late 15th century manuscripts from northern Italy known as the *Tacuinum Sanitatis* emphasizing health shows aristocracy associated with fruit trees, culinary herbs, and flowers, while feudal laborers toil with vegetables (Daunay et al., 2009). The tapestries, extremely expensive to make, were a status symbol of the nobility and any religiosity of the tapestries is clearly not the major focus. These tapestries differ from religious narratives in tone and texture. Rather, the tapestries represent a way to glorify the life and pastimes of the nobility, utterly different than the suffering and stress found in works sponsored by the Church. The hunt is an extension of the masculine passion for war and glory, an activity unavailable to the peasant class, and the bloodlust in hunt is an extension of the power of the ruling classes. Similarly, horticulture and the glorification of the senses represent the feminine attributes of beauty, refinement, and adornment that separated the aristocracy from the peasantry.

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