



Is Jean Bourdichon the Designer of the Hunt of the Unicorn Tapestries?

Jules Janick

The designer of the *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries located in the Cloisters, a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is unknown. The conjecture that they were made to commemorate the marriage of Anne of Brittany to Louis XII of France in 1499 was proposed by James J. Rorimer in 1942. If true, a logical designer for the tapestries would have been Jean (Jehan) Bourdichon (1457-1521), the illustrator and miniaturist associated with the French courts of Louis XI, Charles VIII, Louis XII, and François I, and best known as the illustrator of a personal prayer *Grandes Heures* for Anne made between 1503-1508. This conjecture was tested by comparing style elements including dress, fauna, and flora of the tapestries with illustrations in the *Grandes Heures*. A cryptic inscription in a horn in Tapestry 2 was rearranged to contain the initials A and reverse E (prominent in the tapestry) and the names Jean, Jehan, and Bourdichon in anagrammatic form. The totality of the evidence makes it plausible that Jean Bourdichon or his workshop were intimately associated with the tapestry.

INTRODUCTION

The *Hunt of the Unicorn* consists of seven tapestries that are currently in display at the Cloisters in Upper Manhattan, a branch of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 1). The sequence of the tapestries has been disputed but will be presented in the order provided by Margaret Freeman (1976, p.13). The first five of the six tapestries depict aristocrats, with their minions and dogs hunting and eventually killing the mythological unicorn who appears in captivity enclosed in a corral in the seventh tapestry. The narrative can be summarized using the titles provided by Margaret 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 in two fragments, (6) The unicorn is killed and brought to the castle, (7) The unicorn in captivity. Clearly the last tapestry does not fit the narrative unless it is assumed that the unicorn is resurrected or that this tapestry is not an integral part of the series. Furthermore, some have considered that Tapestry 5 is part of another set (Cavallo, 1993, p.315). The tapestries' design has been dated between 1495 and 1505 based on dress details but completion date of the tapestries is unknown. The many meanings and symbolism of the tapestries are summarized by Cavallo (1993, 1998) but the interpretations are often contradictory. They vary from an allegory of the death and resurrection of Christ to secular interpretations regarding a hunt of a romantic mythological beast in celebration of a marriage. These conjectures are not mutually exclusive.

All the tapestries contain many florid ciphers (A and reverse E) connected by a cord in a bow-

knot indicating they were prepared for a single patron. The initials for Tapestry 1 and 7 (Fig. 2A) are slightly different from those in Tapestry 2 to 5 (Fig. 2B) suggesting a different designer/painter. Tapestry 1 and 7 incorporate a style popular in French and Flemish tapestry known as millefleurs (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 based on symbols by Eleanor C. Marquand (1938) and on botanical evidence by E.J. Alexander and Carol H. Woodward (1941) but they differ slightly. The fruits and nuts of the tapestries have been discussed by Janick and Whipkey (2014).

The origin and meaning of the *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries have long been mysterious. Cavallo (1993) has summarized the many controversies surrounding them. Unfortunately the provenance of the tapestry from its origins has been lost. The earliest knowledge of the tapestries dates to their presence in the castle of the La Rochefoucauld family in 1680 and the initials FR (perhaps for Francis or Ferdinand de la Rochefoucauld) were added later to the sky in Tapestry 3 (Fig. 2C). A clue to the origin of the tapestries is the supposition of James J. Rorimer (1942) that the tapestries were made to commemorate the 1499 marriage of Anne, Duchess of Brittany and Queen of France (1477-1514) and Louis XII of France (1462-1515), a conjecture disputed by Margaret Freeman (1976, p.156-163). If Rorimer is correct, a logical artist to have designed and painted the tapestries would be Jean Bourdichon (1457-1521), the illustrator and miniaturist associated with the French courts of Louis XI, Charles VIII (second husband of Anne after her first proxy marriage to Maximilian I of Austria was annulled), Louis

XII (third husband of Anne), and François I. Bourdichon, best known for the illustration of two personal prayer books, one for Anne known as *Horae ad usum romanum* and generally referred to as *Grandes Heures d'Anne de Bretagne*, and the other for Louis XII known in English as the *Hours of Louis XII*. The object of this paper is to present and consider the assumption that Jean Bourdichon or his workshop is the designer/artist of the cartoon associated with the *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries.

THE TAPESTRIES, THE ROYAL MARRIAGE, AND THE DESIGNER/ARTIST

The reasons for Rorimer's conjecture that the origin of the Hunt tapestries was related to the marriage of Anne of Brittany and Louis XII of France and Margaret Freeman's objections are summarized below.

The Cipher A and Reverse E

The cryptic A and reversed E attached by a twisted cord ending in tassels, which Rorimer calls a cordelière, are ubiquitous in all the tapestries. The cordelière, strictly cords with knots at intervals worn by Saint Francis, were a favorite with Anne as can be seen in her escutcheon (Fig. 3A) and the fact that she founded an order of nuns called the Dames de la Cordelière. Rorimer assumes that A and reverse E represent the first and last letter of Anne's name or perhaps her motto, *A ma vie*, and indeed she used her initial A as a person symbol (Fig. 3B). Margaret Freeman (1976) however, points out that these initials could also refer to other names such as Antoine and Antoinette connected to the Rochefoucauld family or perhaps for the phrase *Amore in Eternum*, which would be appropriate for a wedding. Freeman further makes the point that the tasseled cord attaching the A and E is not truly a cordelière since it lacks a series of knots and is better referred to as a *lac d'amours*. It should be noted that the ornamental initials of Anne (Fig. 3B) appear as an intertwined knotted cord.

Internal Evidence from the Tapestries

The strongest evidence that the tapestries were made for Anne of Brittany's marriage to Louis XII is Rorimer's contention that the noble couple ("Seigneur" and "Lady") in Tapestry 6



Figure 1. 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. Source: Freeman, 1976.



resemble Anne and Louis XII. Freeman agrees that the portrait of the "Seigneur" (Fig. 4F) does resemble Louis XII (Fig. 4D, E) but quibbles over the hair and the necklace that she deems

inappropriate. She observes that the "Lady" (Fig. 4C) appears too old to be Anne who would have been only 22 in 1499. A possible explanation for this is that she wed Charles

V in 1491 and underwent seven pregnancies before Charles' accidental death in 1498. This would have been sufficient to destroy the bloom of her teenage years so vividly shown

Figure 2. Examples of the paired and knotted letters in the tapestries: (A) Tapestry 1 and 7; (B) Tapestry 2 to 5; (C) Tapestry 3.

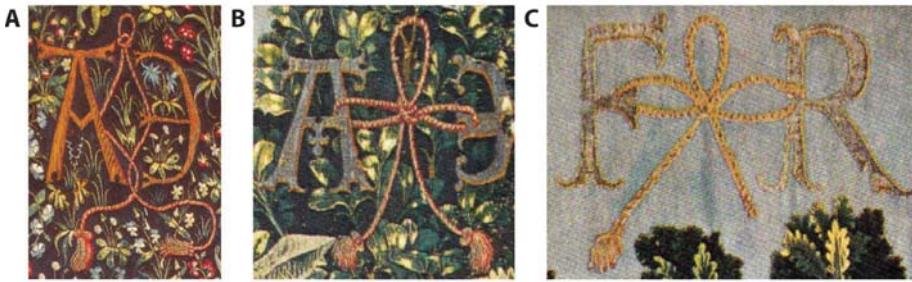


Figure 3. Emblems of Anne of Brittany: (A) escutcheon including cordelière; (B) ornamented initial made with a knotted cord. Source: Mere, 1946.

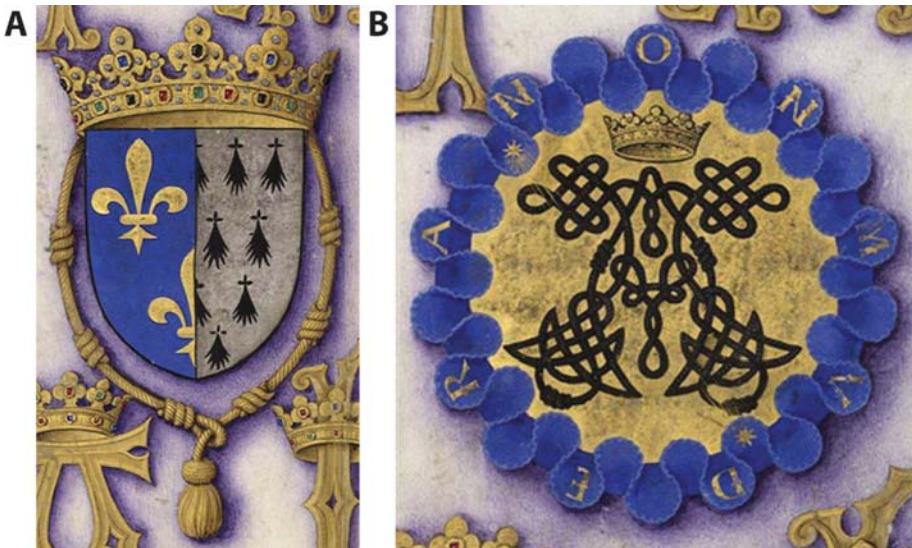
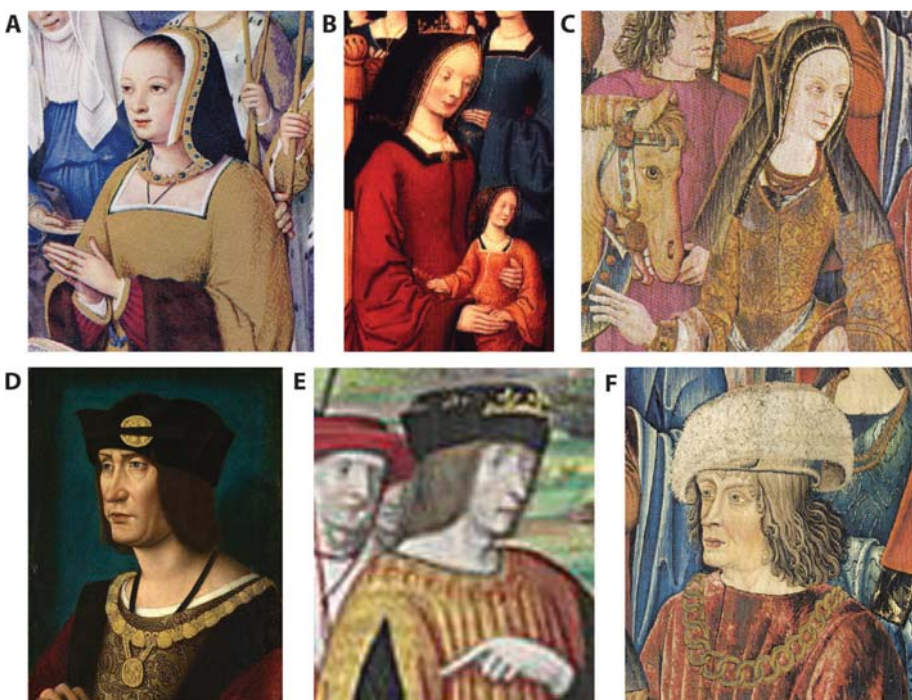


Figure 4. Portraits of Anne of Brittany and Louis XII of France compared with the Seigneur and lady in Tapestry 6: (A) Painting of Anne by Bourdichon from *Grandes Heures*; (B) Painting of Anne in 1503, folio from Bibliothèque Nationale, ms fr. 225, folio 165r *Remèdes de bonne et de mauvaise fortune de Pétrarque*, School of Bourdichon (atelier normand); (C) Lady in Tapestry 6; (D) Louis XII by Jean Perréal; (E) Louis XII in 1503 B.N. ms fr. 225, folio 165r; (F) Seigneur in Tapestry 6.



in an undated painting by the court artist Jean Bourdichon (Limousin, 1954, Fig. X), and which appears to be copied in the miniature of the *Grandes Heures* prayerbook designed between 1503 and 1508 (Fig. 4A). A portrait of Anne dated 1503 (Fig. 4B) attributed to the school of Bourdichon, more closely resembles the “Lady” of Tapestry 6. Thus, I discount Freeman’s objection and assume that the figures of the royal couple in Tapestry 6 are Anne and Louis XII, and furthermore, that the tapestry was made to commemorate their nuptials.

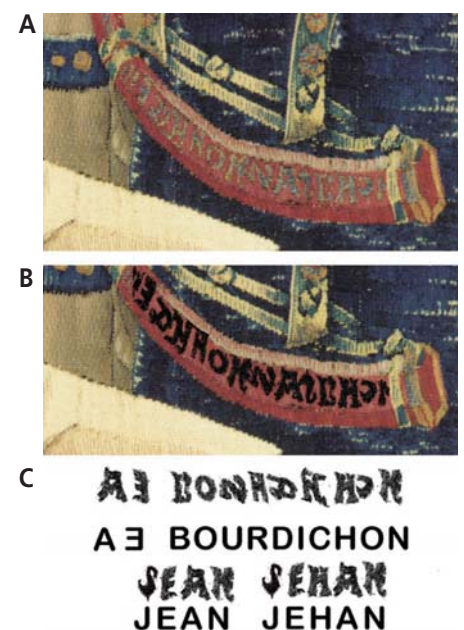
Other evidence that the tapestry is associated with Anne is provided by Rorimer. It includes Anne’s interest in unicorns, the presence of a squirrel in the tapestry that is associated with Anne, the extensive flora in the tapestries that is known to be a particular interest of Anne, and a porcupine (the personal emblem of Louis XII) in a castle flag, although Freeman demurs and thinks it looks more like a lion.

Horn Inscription

Margaret Freeman (1976, p.94) observed that a cryptic inscription on a hunting horn in Tapestry 2 (Fig. 5A) might provide a clue to the designer. She suggests that may be read from right to left: *Jones (Johannes?)* followed by an, then one or two questionable letters, then on, then several more questionable letters with an E near the end – possibly the second letter of *Fecit*. Linda Sipress (1974, p.43) paraphrases Freeman as follows: “Some of the letters may form the name Jean, and an isolated “e” may be part of the Latin *fecit* or “made by”.” Cavallo (1993, p.321) does not agree with this reading.

In view of the hint provided by Freeman I have examined the letters in the horn (Fig. 5A) after

Figure 5. The cryptic letters in the horn of a hunter in Tapestry 2: (A) the horn; (B) horn with letters enhanced; (C) decipherments.



enhancing them with Adobe Photoshop® (Fig. 5B). The series of letters contain an A and a reverse E like the signature initials so common in all the tapestries and also found on the collars of two dogs in Tapestry 1. Nine of the “letters” to the right of the backward E can be rearranged to reveal an anagram of the 10 letters of BOURDICHON after inverting one “letter” to come up with IC (Fig. 5C). Note that an unknown symbol has not been used. However, an inverted mirror image of this symbol forms the letter J, and then using the A and reverse E makes it possible to come up with the name JEAN or JEHAN, a variant used by Bourdichon (Limousin, 1954, p.7). If either of these assumptions is correct, rather than wishful thinking, the message in the hunting horn is a “smoking gun” pointing to Jean (Jehan) Bourdichon as the designer of the cartoon for Tapestry 2. Since Tapestry 2 is probably the first tapestry of the series (Tapestry 1 and 7 are undoubtedly later additions as discussed below), it is plausible that the designer/artist of the cartoon felt compelled to affix his name.

A COMPARISON OF THE UNICORN TAPESTRY AND THE ILLUSTRATIONS IN GRANDES HEURES D'ANNE DE BRETAGNE

The *Grandes Heures* of Bourdichon (476 pages) includes 337 pages with illuminated borders containing images of about 240 plants and over 640 fauna (insects and small animals); 49 full page miniatures mostly of religious subjects that include the famous portrait of Anne praying in front of an illustrated book with her three patron saints, Anne, Ursula, and Catherine; 12 calendar pages with genre scenes of the months; and 2 pages of Anne’s heraldic devices. It incorporates a number of agricultural scenes, two of which include Anne and one of which includes Louis XII.

Grandes Heures can be accessed online (<http://mandragore.bnf.fr/jsp/rechercheExperte.jsp>); the flora and accompanying insects and animals in the border can be found in a volume by Bilimoff (2001); the miniatures are reproduced in color in a commemorative volume by Mêle (1946); and the history of the work is discussed by Paris et al. (2006). This extraordinary prayer-book, which is contemporary with the tapestry, makes it possible to compare elements in the Hunt tapestry with Bourdichon’s paintings.

Flora

Rorimer mentions the fact that many flora in the Unicorn tapestry are found in the *Grandes Heures*. The plants in *Grandes Heures* have been identified by Camus (1894) and are listed in an appendix in Bilimoff’s book (2001, p.138-140). A database of the flora and fauna of *Grandes Heures* has been constructed by Anna Whipkey and Jules Janick (<http://www.hort.purdue.edu/>

newcrop/bilimoff/default.html). Alexander and Woodward (1941) have located 101 different plants in the seven tapestries of which 85 have been identified (Cavello, 1998, Appendix I). Of the 84 species plants identified in the tapestries, 74 have been found in *Grandes Heures*, a concordance of 88%. Paired images of six plants from both sources are shown in Figure 6. The images of the flora in the millefleurs patterns of Tapestry 1 and 7 are much simplified from the images in the borders of *Grandes Heures*. I suggest that the artist had a trove of preliminary sketches of plants that were modified first in the tapestry and then elaborated in the *Grandes Heures*.

Fauna

Animals in the tapestries include hounds (50 images), birds (20), unicorns (6), rabbits (2), lions (2), dragonflies (2), and single images of horse, stag, panther, genet, hyena, squirrel, frog, and butterfly. Of these, all but panther, genet, and hyena can be found in the paintings associated with the *Grandes Heures*. Paired images are shown in Figure 7. There is an additional remarkable similarity. The lion’s head in the fountain of Tapestry 2 is also found in the fountain in the Bourdichon’s miniature Bathsheba Bathing in the *Hours of Louis XII* (Fig. 7B right, top and bottom). These similarities of images suggest that the relationship between

Figure 6. Six plants in the tapestries (left) and *Grandes Heures* (right): (A) oak, Tapestry 4; (B) medlar, Tapestry 3; (C) strawberry, Tapestry 7; (D) rose, Tapestry 5; (E) corn marigold, Tapestry 3; (F) carnation, Tapestry 3.

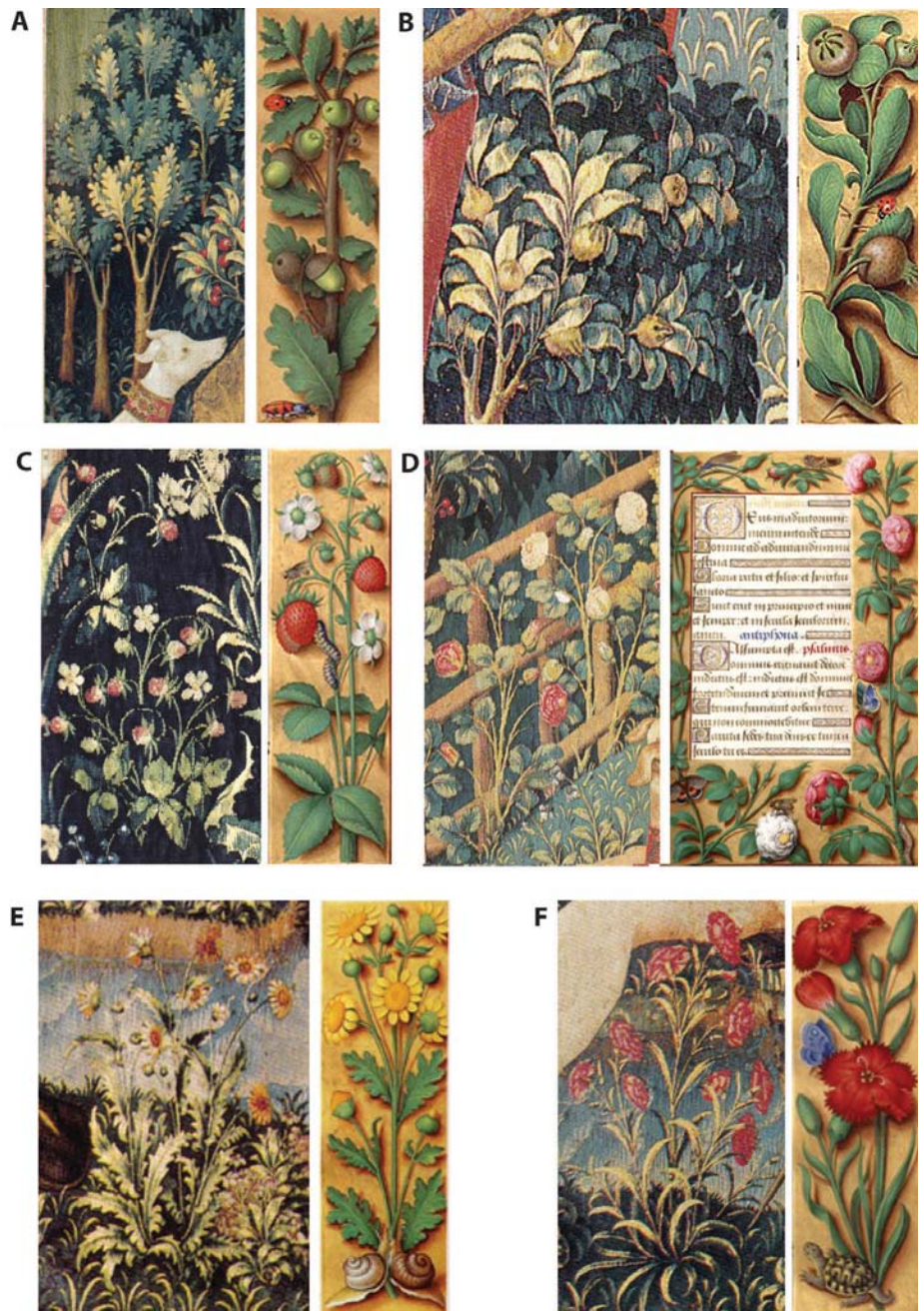
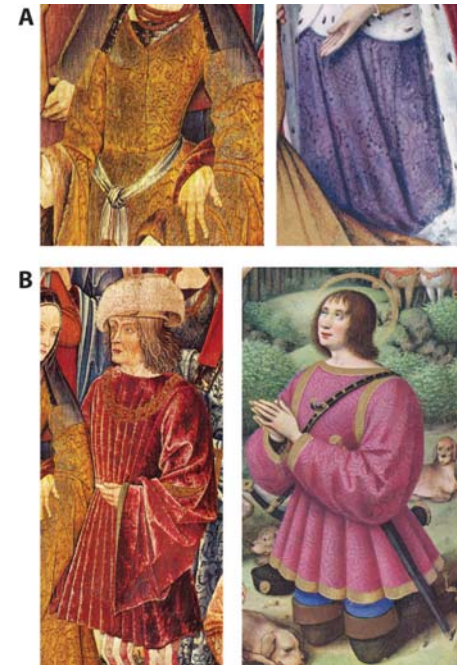


Figure 7. Nine animals in the tapestries (left) and *Grandes Heures* miniatures (Mêlé, 1946) or borders (right): (A) stag, left is from Tapestry 2, right is from Saint Hubert miniature; (B) lion, left is from Tapestry 2, right is from Saint Hubert miniature. Lion head on top is from Tapestry 2 and bottom is from Bathsheba Bathing from the *Hours of Louis XII*; (C) horse, left is from Tapestry 6, right is from Saint Hubert miniature; (D) hound, left is from Tapestry 3, right is from Saint Hubert miniature; (E) squirrel, left is from Tapestry 6; (F) rabbit from Tapestry 2; (G) frog; (H) dragonfly; and (I) butterfly from Tapestry 7.



Figure 8. Fabric embroidery and folds in the Hunt tapestry (left) and the *Grandes Heures* miniatures (right): (A) embroidery in the gown of the lady in Tapestry 6 and in the dress of one of the saints in the portrait of Anne praying in *Grandes Heures*; (B) fabric folds in the costume of the Seigneur in Tapestry 6 and in the skirt of St. Hubert at prayer in *Grandes Heures*.



(Fig. 11B). Clearly Bourdichon had the ability to depict a wide range of emotional imagery.

Castle Scenes. The tapestries (Fig. 12A) and *Grandes Heures* miniatures (Fig. 12B) are replete with castles. Many different views of one castle, which has not been identified, are portrayed in the tapestries emphasizing turrets and mansard rooves (Fig. 12A). Various castles are shown in the miniatures (Fig. 12B). Since Bourdichon was the court painter he must have been very aware of many of the royal palaces and appears to have reconstructed them in imaginary scenes.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Rorimer's conjecture that the Hunt tapestry was made to commemorate the marriage of Anne and Louis XII is compelling despite the objections of Freeman. If this is accepted, Jean Bourdichon would have been the obvious person to design the tapestry because he was clearly a favorite of both Anne and Louis XII. A review of the miniatures of Bourdichon plus an early painting of Anne indicate that he was a superb draftsman, a man of unique artistic talent with a broad interest in zoology, traditional religious imagery, social problems, clothing, zoology, entomology, botany, agriculture, and horticulture. His images of plants with a wide array of insects and other fauna indicate he was a person with vivid imagination and wit. In short

the tapestries and miniatures of Bourdichon is not due to chance but infers that the same artist or workshop is involved.

Stylistic Comparison

The Bourdichon miniatures were inspected to identify elements and stylistic similarities to those of the tapestries. It should be recognized that the miniatures are small religious works (ca. 12.5 × 20 cm) while the tapestries measuring 3.7 m in length allow much greater detail although somewhat obscured by the weaving process. A comparison of elements between the tapestries and some of the Bourdichon miniatures include apparel, body parts (faces, hands), scenes of violence, and castles. In each instant, images were scanned and compared in the same size.

Apparel. The artist of both the tapestries and miniatures shows a great interest in clothing. The Lady in Tapestry 6 wears an embroidered gown as does one of the saints in the portrait of Anne in prayer from *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 8A). The red costume of the Seigneur in Tapestry 6 is comparable to that of the kneeling Saint Hubert in a miniature, with similar folds in the skirt (Fig. 8B).

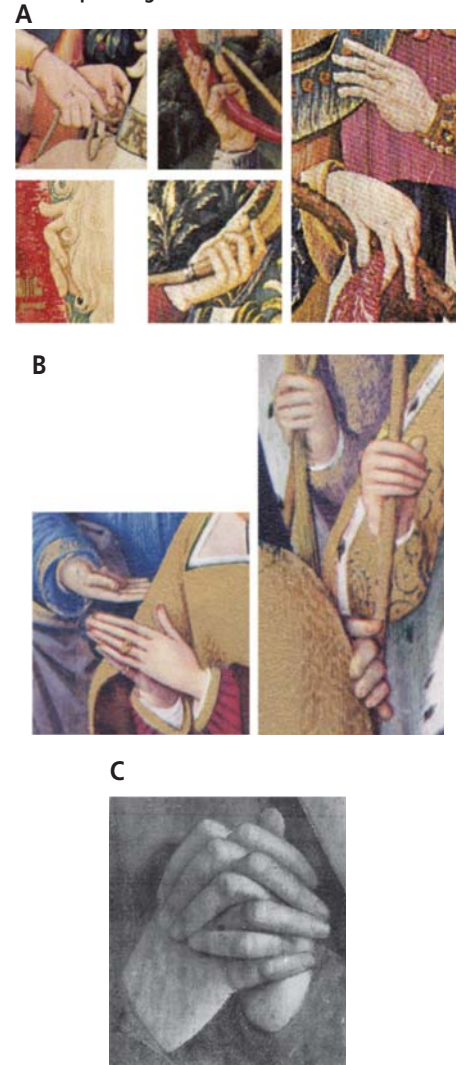
Heads, Hats, and Hands. Heads with diverse hats are compared in the tapestries and *Grandes Heures* miniatures (Fig. 9). Although many of the religious paintings in the *Grandes Heures* show sweet and angelic faces of saints and martyrs as would be required by the patron, there are enough character studies to show parallelism with the strong features shown in the tapestries. Note the facial similarity of the hunter with the red hat with a pompom and helmeted grotesque face from the *Kiss of Judas* miniature (the first head of each series). One of the features of both the tapestries and the miniatures are the beautifully drawn and expressive hands (Fig. 10 A, B). A close up of the clenched hands of Mary (Fig. 10C) from a painting entitled *Descent of the Cross* in the Église de Nouans (Limousin, 1954) shows Bourdichon's skill in the painting of hands.

Scenes of Violence. Tapestry 6 incorporates the brutal, horrific killing of the unicorn in Tapestry 6 (Fig. 11A). While many scenes in the miniatures are saccharine, showing men and women in prayer and study, Bourdichon does not shy away from extreme violence as can be shown in various scenes of arrow wounds, crucifixions, decapitations, and impalement

Figure 9. Various heads with hats in Tapestries 2, 3, 4, and 6 (A) and in various miniatures of *Grandes Heures* (Saint-Mathieu, Saint-Luc, L'Adoration des Mages, Le Baiser de Judas, Saint-Côme and Saint-Damien, Saint-Nicolas) (B). Note the similarity of the hunter with the red hat with a pompom, and the helmeted soldier in the first head of each series.



Figure 10. Hands: (A) select images from Tapestries 3, 5, and 6; (B) miniatures from Anne de Bretagne en Prière from *Grandes Heures*; (C) close up of clenched hands of Mary from a painting entitled *Descent of the Cross* in the Église de Nouans showing Bourdichon's skill in the painting of hands.



he holds all the characteristics and talent of one who could have designed the complex and moving *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestry. While any individual comparison of similarities between the Hunt images and Bourdichon's *oeuvre* is open to question, the sum of the similarities is compelling.

It has been suggested that two artist designers are involved in the tapestry series, one for Tapestry 1 and 7 (and perhaps 5) and one for 2 to 6. It is clear that Tapestry 1 and 7 are a set as shown by the similar millefleurs patterns, and may represent a different narrative. In Tapestry 2 to 6 the unicorn is hunted and killed but in Tapestry 1 and 7 the unicorn is hunted and captured. The figures in Tapestry 1 are stiffer and cruder than 2 to 6, although this might reflect a change in the tapestry workshop. Rorimer has suggested that the main figure in Tapestry 1 might be François I (he was known as Francis of

Figure 11. Scenes of violence: (A) Tapestry 6; (B) *Grandes Heures*. *Les Dix Mille Martyrs de la Légion Thébaïne*.

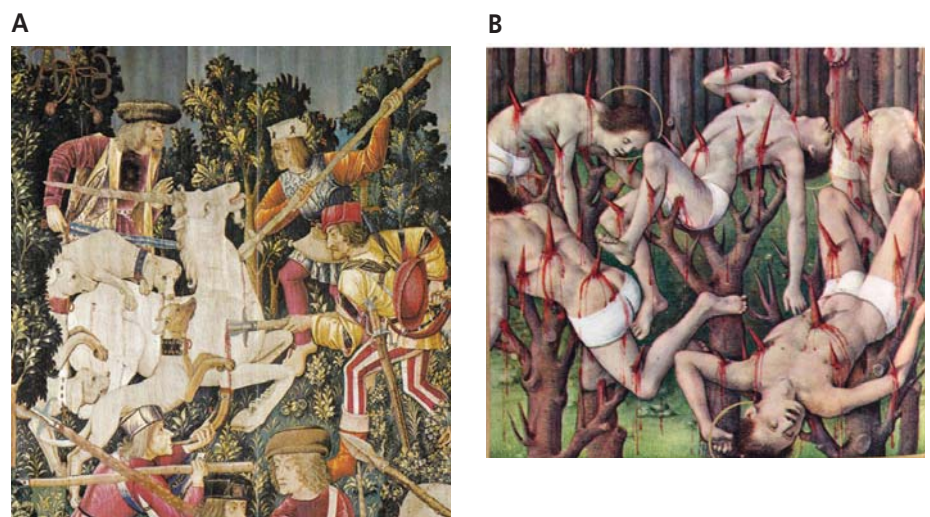


Figure 12. Castles: (A) Tapestries 2, 3, 4, and 6; (B) miniatures (La Visitation, Saint Martin, Sainte Ursula et ses Compagnons, and Saint Sebastien) of *Grandes Heures*.



the Large Nose), cousin and son in law of Louis XII. If the young man beside the royal couple in Tapestry 6 is young François, this would provide evidence that Tapestry 1 and 7 were made much later than Tapestry 2 to 6. Other evidence for different artists is that the pomegranate in Tapestry 7 is a fantasy tree suggesting that the artist was unaware of the plant, while the pomegranate tree in Tapestry 3 is more realistic. If two or more artists were involved, Bourdichon obviously cannot be the artist for both sets. The flowers in the millefleurs pattern in Tapestry 1 and 7 are similar and most can be found in the borders of *Grandes Heures* suggesting that the plant images could have been drawn from the same artist. I suggest that the figures in Tapestry 1 were probably not painted by Bourdichon but done perhaps by a less talented member of his workshop.

I conclude that it is entirely plausible that Jean Bourdichon and his workshop were the artists involved in the *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries. The anagram of Jean Bourdichon in the horn of Tapestry 2, if true, would be positive proof of this assertion. The addition of this major work to Jean Bourdichon enhances his reputation and in my opinion places him in the first rank of Renaissance artists.

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MANUSCRIPTS

Grandes Heures d'Anne de Bretagne, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Mandragore, base des manuscrits enluminés de la BnF. Latin 9474. Artist: Jean Bourdichon <http://mandragore.bnf.fr/jsp/rechercheExperte.jsp>

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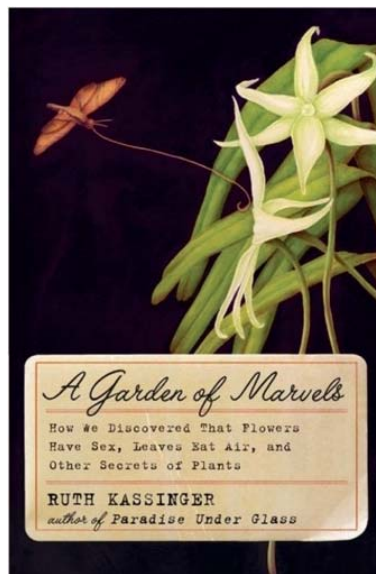
BOOK REVIEWS

The books listed below are non-ISHS-publications. For ISHS publications covering these or other subjects, visit the ISHS website www.ishs.org or the Acta Horticulturae website www.actahort.org

A Garden of Marvels: How We Discover That Flowers Have Sex, Leaves Eat Air, and Other Secrets of Plants. Ruth Kassinger. 2014. William Morrow/HaperCollins Publishers. 416p. ISBN 978-0-06-204899-8. \$25.99. www.harpercollins.com

There are two ways to learn about a particular topic. Either you dive into an arid disciplinary textbook or you read a descriptive novel, which vulgarizes the subject and explains it in layman's terms. For instance, Victor Hugo's description of Napoleon's 1815 Waterloo battle described in "Les Miserables", is certainly worth all the scholarly accounts of this historic battle.

The book written by Ruth Kassinger and recently published by William Morrow belongs to the latter group. It is a literary account of botanical sciences aimed at a curious general public, but also includes well-researched information to interest even specialized horticulturists and botanists. This book is the journey of a clueless gardener who sets out to explain her gardening failures by learning the principles of botany and plant physiology.



Using documented historical facts about plant botany, physiology and breeding, Mrs. Kassinger illustrates the depth of plant sciences using examples drawn from her own experience and from botanical oddities. For instance, did you know of the early botanist's description of the animal-plant hybrid called the vegetable-lamb, or the so-called "boramet", first described by Theophrastus (300 BC) which turned out to be a fantasized account of cotton plants from India? Or are you familiar with the role of Malpighi, then professor at the University

of Bologna, in providing the first descriptions of plant anatomy after the development of early rudimentary microscopes? This book is full of such practical examples using day-to-day experiences as a pretext to explain deeper underlying scientific principles. For example, she uses the production of 1700 pound pumpkins to introduce plant water movement and root function, and the story of Dr. Jian Ping working at the Ball Horticulture Company in Chicago who bred a black petunia, to explain the intricacy of plant breeding. Moreover, the author uses examples such as breeding multi-colored coleus, grafting multiple citrus species onto citrumelo rootstock, orchid pollination and development of the "Tasti-Lee" fragrant tomato, to explore the botanical principles of photosynthesis, hormonal regulation, phytoremediation, plant water movement, grafting compatibility, DNA transgenic technologies and more.

I thus warmly recommend this book to all who wish to broaden their mind and experience a different account of horticulture principles and the science of botany. It is intended for anyone who is not put-off by an intellectually lettered, yet most interesting and eclectic presentation of plant sciences. To conclude, and to give you a taste of the style of Mrs. Kassinger, let me cite the author's prose that exemplifies her descriptive talent as she seamlessly incorporates advanced scientific information into a poetic illustration of nature's marvels:

"Who hasn't looked at the stars in the night's