

Textile (Fiber) Art

Textile art dates back to pre-historic times, when the function of the finished product was purely practical: clothing or blankets for warmth. Over time, the creation of textiles from plant or animal fibers became increasingly complex and elaborate. Those with money could afford to decorate the walls, floors and furniture in their homes with intricate textiles. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and the mechanization of the process of creating fabric, textiles became more accessible to the general populace. Artists and crafters began to experiment with fibers and textiles. Textile art stands out from other media as it often walks the line between beauty and practicality. Today, the terms textile and fiber art are often used to refer to decorative objects that have no practical use.

Tapestry

One of the most famous examples of early textile art is the Bayeux Tapestry. Located in Bayeux, France, the embroidered cloth, which is nearly 230 feet long and 20 inches high, depicts the Norman Conquest of England. It is thought to date from the 11th Century. As it is embroidered, not woven, it is not technically a tapestry. The tapestry contains 70 separate scenes, embroidered on linen with colored yarns. The photo below is of The *Death of Harold*, considered to be the most famous scene of the tapestry.



From the middle ages to the early modern period of Western civilization, tapestries were the most valued form of artistic expression, more valued than paintings. Of course, they had a dual function, art and insulation. One of the most beautiful tapestries of the 15th Century is the series of six entitled *Lady with the Unicorn*. The tapestries apparently were almost lost to history, sitting in storage for centuries until there was a revival of interest in medieval art in the 19th Century. They are now displayed in the Musée de Cluny in Paris, France's national museum of the Middle Ages. Five of the tapestries are commonly interpreted as representing the five senses. The sixth, pictured below, shows the words "À mon seul désir" (literally, to my only desire). The meaning, while not entirely clear, may be "love" or "understanding". Alternatively, it may mean "According to my desire alone".



The Arts and Crafts movement, which began in the 1860s in Great Britain, arose from concerns about the impact of industrialization on design and traditional crafts. One of the most influential figures of the movement was William Morris (1834-1896), who promoted the joy of craftsmanship. Morris was one of the principal contributors to the revival of British textile arts. He and his firm designed tapestries, stained glass windows, wallpaper, furniture and fabrics throughout the Victorian period. Morris described tapestry weaving as “the noblest of the weaving arts”. He taught himself to weave tapestries from a fourteenth century French crafts manual. Among his most famous tapestries is *The Tree of Life*, shown below.



Jean Lurçat (1892-1966) was a French cubist artist who is credited with bringing tapestries back into contemporary popularity. His tapestries, which became increasingly ambitious and detailed over time, often featured recurring motifs such as nature, animals, and the cosmos. The tapestry below is entitled *Nature Morte* (Still Life).



There is a museum devoted to his art in Angers, France, in which a large space contains his tapestries. In particular, *Le Chant du Monde* (The Song of the World) is a collection of ten tapestries that is a tribute to *L'Apocalypse*, a medieval tapestry (and the oldest surviving medieval French tapestry) displayed in the Chateau d'Angers.

There are any number of contemporary tapestry artists, some of whom push the boundaries of "tapestry" as traditionally defined. One such artist is Gavin Turk (1967-still active). Turk created a *Mappa del Mondo* from street rubbish, squashed to make a two-dimensional street map. The design was then sent to China to be turned into a wool and silk tapestry.

