

THE TAPESTRIES FROM CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL.

BY AYMER VALLANCE.

IN the loan Exhibition of French Art, held at Burlington House, London, in the opening months of 1932, were included two tapestries, numbered in the catalogue 27 and 32 respectively, which should be of peculiar interest to Kentish folk, inasmuch as they once formed part of the furniture of Canterbury Cathedral. They were lent for exhibition by the Cathedral of Aix in Provence, to which they now belong, and of which they decorate the quire and south aisle. The particular pieces exhibited in London form part of a series depicting the Life of our Lord.

The material is mainly wool, with the occasional introduction of silk, to give variety of texture, and to heighten the effect in places here and there.

The technique of the process is that known as *haute lisse*, which means that the tapestry is hand-woven in an upright loom, the weaver being stationed at the back, and seeing the face of the web, so long as it is in progress, only by reflection in a mirror through the vertical threads of the warp. Such is the method invariably employed for tapestries of any size. For smaller pieces, in contradistinction to the *haute lisse*, the alternative process of *basse lisse* is used. When employing this method the weaver sits, as at an embroidery frame, and looks down on to the face of the web, stretched out horizontally. Among the tapestry hangings of Reims Cathedral is a piece in which the Blessed Virgin is depicted as a young girl, seated, and weaving at just such a *basse lisse* as here described.

The history of these tapestries has not been uneventful. Originally made, or rather finished, in 1511, expressly for Canterbury Cathedral, as internal evidence, in the shape of shields, badges and inscriptions, shows, they were presented,

a right princely gift, some by Richard Dering, cellarer of the community, the others by Prior Thomas Goldstone the Second. Dering's tapestries hung, according to William Somner (1640), who saw them all *in situ*, above the quire-stalls on the north side, and Goldstone's on the south side. The stalls of the quire of Canterbury, unlike those of many cathedrals and larger churches in this country, such as Beverley, Carlisle, Chester, Ely, Gloucester, Lancaster, Lincoln, Manchester, Nantwich, Ripon, Winchester and Windsor, were uncanopied overhead, so that there was ample space behind and above for hangings to depend against the stonework of Prior Eastry's side screens. For the north side, as the inscription, formerly existing in the border of the tapestry, recorded, *Ricardus Dering hujus ecclesie commonachus & Celerarius me fieri fecit Anno Dom Millesimo quingentesimo undecimo*; while for the south side *Thomas Goldstone hujus ecclesie Prior sacræque Theologie Professor, me fieri fecit Anno Dom Millesimo quingentesimo undecimo*; and another account says that he gave *tres pannos pulcherimos opere de arysse subtiliter intextos ortum virginis cum vita et obitu ejusdem clare et splendide configurantes*.

These hangings are repeatedly mentioned in the Cathedral Inventories. Thus on 10th April 1540 there occurs "Item one" (i.e. one set of) "faire new hanging of riche tapestrie cont'" (containing) "vj peces of the Story of Christ and O' Lady". In 1584 there are scheduled "Hangings of Arras roonde about the Chore", and again, at the Metropolitan Visitation in 1634, "Six peices of arras hanging." They remained intact all through the Reformation changes until the end of August 1642, when, a report having reached the headquarters of the Parliamentary party that the authorities of Canterbury Cathedral had collected a store of arms and ammunition to fortify the church against intruders, a body of Puritan troops, under the command of Col. Edwin Sandys, was despatched to take possession of the place. Yielding to superior force, those in charge of the Cathedral handed up the keys. Whereupon the soldiers invaded the building and proceeded to deface its fittings and

ornaments. On the second day the iconoclasts "further exercised their malice upon the Arras hangings of the Quire, representing the whole Story of our Saviour, wherein observing the figures of Christ, . . . one said 'Here is Christ', and swore that he would stab Him, which they did accordingly so far as the figures were capable thereof, besides many other villainies". The slashings and other damage mentioned explain how it is that the set of tapestries proves, at the present day, to be imperfect.

Having, on 13th December 1653, by means of "The Instrument of Government", in effect a *coup d'état*, constituted himself Protector, and having thus obtained virtually absolute control, Oliver Cromwell began to carry out a fresh Reformation of Religion, in the process of which the Cathedral tapestries were taken down from their places and carried away from Canterbury. The record of the exact date of their removal has not been found, but it would seem to have been between the closing weeks of 1653 and the early part of the year 1656.

An interior view of the Cathedral, painted in oils on canvas, now in the possession of Mr. W. D. Carøe, F.S.A., inscribed "Thos. Johnson *fecit*. Canterbury Quire as in 1657. Ye prospecte from ye Clock¹ House" (i.e. under the central tower or from the top of the pulpitum) was exhibited at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries on 1st December 1910, and again at the Exhibition of British Primitive Paintings, held at Burlington House in October and November 1923. This painting shows the quire as it was after having been stripped of its tapestries, though it also shows quite distinctly the iron hooks on which they were suspended. There were two sets of hooks, one set on the enclosing stone screens of the quire, and another set, consisting of a couple of hooks, one of which was some distance above the other, on the inner face of each column on either side of the quire. These hooks might well have been provided to hold the horizontal beams or rods on which the tapestries were hung. Mr. Carøe considers that not the pillar hooks, but the hooks

¹ The clock was removed in 1760.

on Eastry's screens, fulfilled this purpose. Hung in that position the tapestries certainly would have served the practical, utilitarian function of excluding draughts which might penetrate the openwork of Eastry's screen wall. Rev. C. E. Woodruff, however, says distinctly that the tapestries were "suspended from hooks fixed in the pillars above the traceried stonework of Prior Eastry's lateral screens."¹ Anyhow, all the hooks were removed, presumably in 1836, by Mr. George Austin, surveyor and architect to the Dean and Chapter, and their places patched with new stone, a valuable historical record being thereby obliterated.

In the minutes of the Chapter of Aix in Provence it is recorded that on 4th April 1656, for the sum of 1200 crowns, Canon de Mimata, of Aix, purchased in Paris for the quire of the Cathedral church, to which he was attached, a set of tapestries depicting the Life of Christ and of the Blessed Virgin. Considering the prevailing vogue in taste at the moment (as manifested by the Palace of Versailles, begun under Louis XIV in 1661) it is a marvel that anyone then living should have admired the Canterbury tapestries sufficiently to care to spend a *sou* on the acquisition of them. The precise origin of these tapestries seems to have been unknown to their new owners, or, if known, it was not entered at the time in the Chapter minutes, and in the end came to be forgotten, or at best but a vague tradition.

But "the manuscript history of the town of Aix, written at the end of the seventeenth century and at the beginning of the eighteenth, says that this tapestry had belonged (*servi*) to the church of St. Paul in London, or to some quite other cathedral church in England (*toute autre église cathédrale d'Angleterre*)." The above quotation is from the pen of M. Fauris de Saint Vincens, an eminent French antiquary of his day, who, in 1816, published a "*Mémoire sur la Tapisserie du chœur de l'Église Cathédrale d'Aix*." M. de Saint Vincens sums up his inquiry with the following significant passage: "*J'ai longtemps douté si une tapisserie, sur laquelle on voit les armoiries de trois archevêques de Cantorbéry,*

¹ *Memorials of Canterbury Cathedral*, p. 279.

n'aurait pas été destinée à la Métropole de Cantorbéry, plutôt qu'à la cathédrale de Londres." The above-mentioned "*Mémoire*" by M. de Saint Vincens, bound up with a collection of other papers from the same pen, relating to the archæology of the district, and lettered on the back "*Recherches Françaises*", was given by the author to a Mr. Joseph Russell in 1818. The latter became the intermediary of an interesting correspondence between M. de Saint Vincens and the eminent English archæologist and glass-painter, Thomas Willement, concerning the heraldry of the Aix tapestries. The unpublished notes of this correspondence, bearing date 1818 and 1820, in the handwriting of Willement, are bound in with the printed papers of the "*Recherches Françaises*" which, becoming the property of Willement's daughter, the late Mrs. Bramah, was sold at the dispersal of the Davington Priory collection on 10th and 11th April 1923. In one of these notes, which is dated 15th February 1820, Willement writes:—"I have no doubt of the tapestry having belonged to the cathedral church of Canterbury. It might have been begun during the time that Morton was Archbishop, and completed under his successor, Warham, which would account for the arms of both these prelates being found upon it"; and in a final postscript he says: "It appears in Hasted's *History of the City of Canterbury* (1801) that the choir of that church was adorned with costly hangings. Those on the north side, representing the life and death of our Saviour, were the benefaction of Richard Dering, monk and cellarer of Christ Church Priory, Canterbury, in 1511, 'as the legend at the bottom imported'. This seems to clear all the doubtful points. The deer in some other part of Hasted's work is mentioned as being united with a ring as device of Dering. . . . The letter R. evidently was the initial of his baptismal name." The above note, then, in his own script, and signed with his autograph, over the date of September 1826, represents Willement's matured verdict as to the provenance of the Aix tapestries. In the following year Willement published the result of his investigations. In a note on

page 6 of his *Heraldry of Canterbury Cathedral* (1827) he says : " Prior Goldstone, and Richard Deering, monk and cellarer, in 1511, gave costly hangings to adorn the choir. Part of these now decorate the Cathedral church of Aix, in Provence, on high festivals." This particular passage, however, seems to have escaped observation ; and divers antiquaries, since Willement's day, have endeavoured to trace the origin of the tapestries, and have formed opinions, more or less accurate, upon the subject. Thus, in 1878, Champeaux, in his *Handbook on Tapestry*, says : " The monks of Canterbury manufactured in 1595 a hanging in tapestry for the walls of the cathedral. These hangings are now at Aix in Provence." The date 1595 is a grotesquely impossible one. Not only is it incompatible with the style of the design and the heraldry on the tapestries, but also with historical fact. For all the monks in this country had been ejected upwards of half a century before 1595, at which time Queen Elizabeth, implacable foe of the unreformed religion, was in occupation of the throne. The late Mr. S. W. Kershaw, Librarian of Lambeth Palace, managed to attain somewhat nearer to the facts ; but it was reserved for the learned scholar, Dr. Montague Rhodes James, late Provost of King's College, Cambridge, and now Provost of Eton, to arrive afresh, by a perfectly independent train of research, at the problem's correct solution, and to give it a much wider currency than theretofore. It was the internal evidence of the mutilated inscription, recording the fact of the tapestry having been made by direction of a certain cellarer, an office not to be found in a secular establishment, that gave Dr. James a clue, and convinced him that it was to a monastic cathedral that he must trace the origin ; while an examination of the coats of arms enabled him, as it had enabled Willement, a century earlier, to identify the Aix tapestries, beyond the possibility of doubt, with those which had formerly been provided to adorn the quire of Christ Church Priory at Canterbury. Even had tradition been silent on the point, it is self-evident that the tapestries must have been intended originally for some place with more spacious accommodation

than Aix Cathedral affords, since, as remarked by M. de Saint Vincens in 1816, there was not room enough for the display of the whole series in the quire there, but five panels had to be kept in the Sacristy. Later, when Dr. James visited Aix in 1904, he found five pieces out of the set, comprising nine distinct subjects, preserved in the palace of the Archbishop.¹

It should be mentioned that, after they had found a domicile in Aix, the tapestries were not fated to abide there always unmolested. They were carried off thence during the Revolution, but eventually the Archbishop of Aix, Mgr. de Cicé, bought them back again for his Cathedral, where they remain to this day.

There now survive twenty-six, or, according to a different computation, twenty-seven, subjects altogether, but it is certain that the existing series is not complete. Moreover, the various scenes have been so much chopped and changed about that their correct number and sequence must remain to some extent a matter of conjecture. Dr. James reckons that there would originally have been thirty scenes. It is on record that the tapestries consisted of six pieces or strips, and if each strip comprised five subjects, there would have been three strips or fifteen subjects on either side of the quire, fifteen depicting the Life of our Lord, and fifteen the Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary. As already mentioned, the subjects extant are not consecutive, but, so far as can be ascertained, they should stand in the following order: Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary, her Presentation in the Temple, the Annunciation, Visitation, the Appearance of the Angels to the Shepherds, Nativity of Christ, His Baptism, Christ preaching, the Raising of Lazarus, Entry into Jerusalem, Christ washing His Apostles' Feet, the Betrayal, Christ before Pilate, the Scourging, Crowning with Thorns, Crucifixion, Deposition from the Cross, the Harrowing of Hell, the Resurrection, Our Lord appearing to His Mother and the Apostles after His Resurrection, Pentecost, Death

¹ "The Tapestries at Aix-en-Provence and at La Chaise Dieu" by Dr. Montague Rhodes James, in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, N.S., Vol. V, 1907, pp. 506 *et seq.*

of the Blessed Virgin, her Burial, her Assumption, St. John receiving the Golden Palm, and Christ in Glory with His Mother and Saints kneeling round His throne.

It is not to be wondered at if the tapestries, or at any rate certain details of them, should have roused the indignation and hostility of the Puritan faction. It is only necessary to particularise the "anthropomorphic" figure of God the Father in the Baptism scene; the version of the Presentation of the child Mary in the Temple, as contained in the Apocryphal Gospels; the legend of St. John Evangelist with the Golden Palm, or that of the Jew, whose hands, in his impious attempt to overturn the coffin in which the body of the Blessed Virgin lay, were miraculously severed at the wrists, and lastly Mary's bodily Assumption into Heaven. All these incidents are illustrated in the tapestries under notice.

In Goldstone's tapestries occur his own rebus, the arms of Archbishops Morton (1486 to 1500), Dean (1501 to 1503) or St. Thomas, and Warham (1503 to 1532), of France and England quartered, and the arms posthumously assigned to King Ethelbert, viz. three torteaux, the two upper ones charged each with a lion, and the bottom one with the bust of a king. In Dering's tapestries occur his own rebus of a couchant deer with his initial R, the arms of Christ Church Priory, and of Archbishop Dean again, as well as France and England, and King Ethelbert.

Although made for use in England, the tapestries are obviously not of English workmanship. In the catalogue of the French Exhibition they are described, loosely enough, as of the "French school". More probably they were produced at Brussels or at one of the great centres of the tapestry-weaving industry in Northern Flanders. They are unquestionably more Brabantine than French in character. The treatment of the subjects in general, and notably of the draperies, with the characteristic mannerism of their crisp and angular folds, is late-Gothic, and suggests Flemish or possibly Burgundian influence; while certain details of the architectural framework, especially the dividing pilasters,

with their quasi-classic capitals, anticipate the oncoming deluge of the Italian Renaissance.

A tapestry panel loaned to the Victoria and Albert Museum by the Rector and Churchwardens of Presteigne, Radnorshire, and depicting the Entry into Jerusalem, is practically a replica of the same subject in the Aix scenes; and, as such, is of the highest value and interest, because the unmistakably North Flemish character of the framework at the top, and of the floral border surrounding the whole, affords presumptive evidence of a Flemish origin for all alike.

What individual artist or artists may have furnished the original working cartoons it is idle to speculate. In a set comprising so many separate compositions it is scarcely likely that the entire series would have been designed by the hand of a single artist. But that there may be discerned throughout that strong family likeness which one would expect in the productions of one and the same atelier; and that they are all of one period, viz. the opening years of the sixteenth century, does not admit of dispute.

Two specimen panels here illustrated depict the Nativity of our Lord and His Baptism respectively. In the first-named, two Angels hover above (he on the left in alb and cope, he on the right in alb and dalmatic) holding a scroll whereon five words, "*et in terra pax omnibus*", from the chant of the heavenly host, are written. Mary and Joseph kneel to adore the Divine Infant, Who, surrounded by a halo, lies on the ground between them. The attitude of the Blessed Virgin is remarkably reverential. Joseph holds in his right hand a lighted candle, his left hand raised and hollowed to make a wind-screen for the flame. Either a candle or a lantern is a very usual feature of the Nativity in mediæval art, the idea being, of course, to denote night-time, for, in order to depict the whole scene as lucidly as possible, it was rendered invariably in daylight colouring, *chiaroscuro* effects of the Rembrandt type not having been introduced until a later period. The shepherd behind St. Joseph carries his bagpipes slung over his left forearm. The heads

of ox and ass, in allusion to the prophecy of Isaiah, "The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his master's crib", may be discerned in the background.

The treatment of the group illustrating the Baptism of our Lord presents no unusual feature. On the left a kneeling angel, vested in alb and cope, holds our Lord's robe, laid aside on His entering the water of Jordan river. Above, the clouds are rolled back and the heavens opened. In the opening appear the Eternal Father, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, constituting, together with the Christ beneath, the complete representation of the Holy Trinity. Behind, in the distance, is a typical walled town of the period, and on the right, behind the Baptist, a fairly realistic oak tree.

These two subjects, viz. the Nativity and the Baptism of Christ, though immediately adjoining one another, are not woven in one continuous piece, but sewn together with a vertical join through the middle of the dividing pilaster, a circumstance which goes to show that there would formerly have been additional subjects intervening, which are now missing. Thus there must almost certainly have been the Adoration of the Magi, if not the Circumcision, the Presentation in the Temple, the Flight into Egypt or the Finding in the Temple, none of which occurs among the extant scenes at the present day.

The two examples exhibited in London in 1932 are each approximately 12 ft. 6 in. long by 7 ft. 6 in. high. They comprise two subjects or panels apiece, representing the Entry into Jerusalem, the Washing of Feet, the Betrayal and Christ before Pilate. They are divided from one another by pilasters, while along the top and bottom runs a border of flowers and foliage, in which an armorial shield or other device is introduced at intervals. Thus, above the Entry into Jerusalem is the shield of Christ Church Priory, and above the Betrayal the arms of England (quarterly France modern and the leopards of England). In the last-named scene, Judas, in the act of kissing our Lord, is portrayed with the vivid sandy-red hair and beard of tradition; and



TAPESTRY FROM CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL.
Now in the Cathedral of Aix in Provence.

the soldiers, sent to apprehend Christ, have cuirasses damascened with pronouncedly Renaissance designs in gold or yellow. A dramatic touch is afforded by a lantern lying on the ground, having been let fall in the tumult of the moment.

The colouring, which must, no doubt, originally have been gay and brilliant, is no longer what it was. If still rich, it has yet become much bedimmed and mellowed by time. It should be remarked that the figure of Christ, which, according to the description in the *Mémoire* already quoted, "*est toujours vêtu (excepté dans son Baptême) en robe longue violette*", is now distinguishable throughout the series by robes of a deep creamy white, or biscuit colour, that could not possibly be described as "violet". It only goes to prove how much the tapestry colours have faded since 1816. In the Baptism scene His loin-cloth is white, with a blue patterned border.

In conclusion, if any pre-Reformation tapestry hangings belonging to any Cathedral or other great church in this country are still in existence, *in situ* or otherwise, it must be phenomenal indeed. The two known instances of churches possessing ancient tapestry are no exceptions, since in neither case is the tapestry a traditional belonging of the place. That at Presteigne church, already mentioned, was presented by a parishioner, Mr. Thomas Owen, in 1727; while a large panel at Lyme Regis, representing a royal wedding, was given by the Rev. Edward Peele so recently as 1886. The tapestry hangings at Winchester College; Magdalen College, Oxford; Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire; St. Mary's Hall, Coventry; and at Hampton Court, not being ecclesiastical property, do not come into the same category.

Though the Canterbury tapestries, then, have a high intrinsic value, that value is enhanced, if it were possible, by their rarity, their historic associations and their extreme beauty as decoration. And yet it is unlikely that, had they not been banished overseas at the time when they were, these hangings would have been suffered to retain their

original position through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the present day. But, as it has befallen them, when despised and rejected of Parliament men, that they should be rescued for Aix, they have been fortunate in finding there a neighbourly welcome and a home of refuge, where, though irrevocably lost to our own island, they have had reserved for them, in the world-wide sphere of lovers of art, a more cosmopolitan, and perhaps also a more appreciative, public than ever they knew before in the old days at Canterbury.

NOTE.—Acknowledgments are due to Dr. Montague Rhodes James, F.S.A., Provost of Eton, from whose paper, published in Volume XI of the *Cambridge Antiquarian Society's Communications*, I have borrowed many important details; to Mr. H. T. Mead, Librarian and Curator of the Beane Institute at Canterbury, for the loan of the complete set of photographs, taken in 1895, presented by Dr. James to the Canterbury Museum; and also to the Rev. Antony Milton, formerly of St. Thomas the Martyr, Burgate, Canterbury, for useful references and especially for the loan of a unique volume acquired by him from Davington Priory, Faversham, comprising among a collection of French archæological papers, 1814 to 1818, the rare pamphlet entitled *Mémoire sur la Tapisserie du Chœur de l'Église Cathédrale d'Aix*, par L.P. D.S.V. (Le Président de Saint Vincens) printed at Aix in 1816, together with twelve pages of unpublished manuscript notes by Thomas Willement. I am further indebted for valuable particulars to Mr. A. J. B. Wace, F.S.A., of the Department of Textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Mrs. Dorothy Gardiner, Mr. Arthur Coombe and the Rector of Presteigne, as also to two published works: *Inventories of Christ Church, Canterbury*, transcribed and edited by J. Wickham Legg, F.S.A., and W. H. St. John Hope, M.A. (1902), and *Memorials of the Cathedral and Priory of Christ, in Canterbury*, by the Revs. C. Eveleigh Woodruff and William Danks (1912).

A.V.