



TAPESTRIES

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WHAT IS A TAPESTRY?

RATHER LIKE 'HOOVER' (vacuum cleaner) and 'Biro' (ballpoint pen), the word 'tapestry' is used today as a catch-all term for numerous types of fabric. True tapestry, of the sort you would find in almost any large, old country house, is a woven fabric distinguished from cloth we might wear by the use of 'discontinuous weft threads', where one pick (row) of weft may have many different coloured threads. The change in colour of the threads across the tapestry creates a design, which often tells a story. Tapestry can today be machine woven but in the past it was woven by hand; even now, true tapestry is hand woven. Embroidery, cross-stitch, canvas work and so-called 'tapestry kits' are not actually tapestries. The most famous tapestry of all, the *Bayeux Tapestry*, is in fact an embroidery, worked in woollen threads on a linen background. Today the word is most often associated with wall hangings but may also include furnishings and even garments such as copes (cloaks worn by the clergy). We cannot be sure that the different words used in the past and translated as 'tapestry' have the same meaning today.

In order fully to appreciate tapestries it is important to understand how they are made. Although the finished piece may be extremely complex, tapestries are woven on a simple type of loom, that is, a frame that holds the threads known as warps. This might be as small as a picture frame a few inches long or as huge as will fit into the space available. The weft threads go over and under the warps to make the design, but

A painting of a fifteenth-century dyeworks creating a red dye, probably using madder.



The *Bayeux Tapestry*, which is really an embroidery, showing the comet that appeared in the sky in 1066 and was seen as a bad omen.

only in the areas where that particular colour is needed.

Traditionally tapestries might be produced on either an upright loom called a 'high warp' (*haute lisse*) or a horizontal loom called a 'low warp' (*basse lisse*). The most usual was the high warp, though the end product is little different whichever is used. On the *haute lisse* one end of each warp thread is

attached to a roller beam at the top and the other end at the bottom for the length of tapestry you want to produce and begins wound around the top beam. Traditionally the weaver sits at the back of warps and they are wound down to the bottom roller as the weaving progresses. With the *basse lisse* the weaver sits up to the loom and again the warps are wound

Weavers working on two *haute-lisse* or high-warp looms. Note the fixed warp threads, seen here in white.





Tapestry weavers at Aubusson, France, in the late 1940s working on a *basse-lisse* or low-warp loom.

from a roller at the back towards the weaver as sections are completed. For a large piece made on either loom two, three, four or more weavers may sit side by side, each working on a different section of the design.

On a high-warp loom a system of cords is attached to alternate warps and pulled when needed to create a space called a 'shed' so that the weft can be inserted. The same function is done by treadles worked by the feet under a low-warp loom, which has the advantage of leaving both hands free. Weaving is done using bobbins wound with the different colours of yarn. On a large tapestry there will be many bobbins across the work, and they are so shaped as to hold the weft

These weavers are working on a piece designed by Eva Rothschild. Note the warp threads (here in black) and the bobbins hanging from the work, which contain the coloured weft.

