



SIR WILLIAM BURRELL'S 'SACRAMENT' TAPESTRY

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By H. C. MARILLIER

Prominent amongst the examples of ancient tapestry in the fine collection of the Metropolitan Museum of New York are seven fragments representing incidents relating to the Sacraments. These were acquired from the Albert Goupil sale at Paris in 1888 by the late Mr. J. Pierpont Morgan, and were presented by him to the Museum in 1907. A further fragment representing part of the order of Confirmation was for some years on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum by Miss Enid DuCane, and has since been acquired for its permanent collection as part of the Murray bequest.

Much has been written on the subject of these tapestries, particularly by the late Mr. G. Leland Hunter in his *Practical Book on Tapestries* (Lippincott, 1925). There can be little doubt that they formed part of one large composition of fourteen subjects arranged in two tiers, the lower one illustrating the Seven Sacraments, and the upper one showing seven scenes from the Old Testament in which they are prefigured. The background consists uniformly of a bluish brocade or damask in typical early pine design, and the flooring is of diapered tiles, above a foundation, which is carried all round as a sort of border, of brickwork.

That the tapestry is of Tournai origin and dates from the fifteenth century has never been disputed. Tournai followed upon Arras (which was practically destroyed by Charles XI in 1477) as the leading centre of the tapestry industry, and maintained that position until it was usurped by Brussels at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The leading weavers of Tournai were Pasquier Grenier (d. 1493) and his son Jean, who enjoyed the patronage of the house of Burgundy and were (especially the father) men of considerable consequence in the city. Many of the most famous

gothic tapestries in existence were the work of Pasquier Grenier. In 1439 Philippe Le Bon, Duke of Burgundy, bought at Bruges a Tournai tapestry of the Seven Sacraments for his son the Comte de Charolais, afterwards Charles the Bold; and the high value placed upon this piece led to its preservation in the chapel of Ferdinand and Isabella at Granada, whence, according to the legend, it was discarded as derelict in 1871 and acquired in fragments by the painter Mariano Fortuny, amongst whose effects it was sold in 1875 and became the property of M. Albert Goupil. From these data, assuming them to be correct, Mr. Hunter and other writers have generally agreed to identify the Metropolitan Museum fragments with the tapestry bought by Philippe Le Bon in 1439, and have assigned to them consequently a date which places them among the very earliest gothic tapestries which have survived—a date, moreover, which is borne out by the fashion of the costumes, their patterns, and the design of the background.

There the matter might have rested but for a recent discovery which seems not only to throw doubt on this alleged origin of the fragments, but to invest them with another of at least as great, if not even greater interest. At the same time a further fragment of the series has come to light, and has passed into the possession of that distinguished collector of gothic tapestries, Sir William Burrell. The new discovery and the new fragment are so closely associated that they have to be considered together.

For what follows I am indebted to the researches of M. Paul Rolland of the Académie Royale d'Archéologie de Belgique, who together with Mme. Crick-Kuntziger, director of the Musée du Cinquantenaire at Brussels, and M. Morelowski of the Polish University at Wilno, has published a short monograph on the subject.¹ A cartulary of the parish church of St. Quentin at Tournai discloses the interesting fact that in 1464 Pasquier Grenier and his wife, Marguerite de

¹ 'Le Tapissier Pasquier Grenier et l'Eglise St. Quentin à Tournai,' extrait de *La Revue Belge d'Archeo-*

logie et Histoire d'Art, July-Sept., 1936.

Lannoy made themselves responsible for the cost of certain pillars supporting the arches of a new ambulatory built behind the choir of the church, which adjoined the house and garden of Grenier himself, and of which he was a devout patron. The churches of Tournai owed much to its merchant citizens. This ambulatory was a considerable addition to the original edifice, and included three chapels set radially at its outer end. Of these chapels, furthermore, Pasquier Grenier and his wife provided the end one, having a vaulted ceiling adorned with painted angels and showing his arms on the central boss. When the building was completed, probably in 1474, it is on record that Grenier furnished it with tapestry. The chapel was dedicated to the Seven Sacraments, and the tapestry was designed to illustrate them. It may be no more than a coincidence that Grenier had seven sons ; but on the other hand, from what will presently appear, the fact may have some significance in the choice of the dedication.

The tapestry (or tapestries, for a shadow of doubt here creeps into the record) was still on view in 1650, although nothing seems to be known about it later than that, and its final history is obscure. M. Rolland argues with much persuasiveness that the Metropolitan Museum and other fragments are the remains of this tapestry, and not of the one bought by Philippe Le Bon in 1439. Mme. Crick-Kuntziger concurs on the whole in his conclusions but is conscious of certain discrepancies. It may be said at once that the corner-stone of M. Rolland's argument is based upon the new fragment recently acquired by Sir William Burrell, and some description of this is necessary. As it appears in the illustration, it consists of two scenes put together horizontally. On the left is a kneeling group surrounding a middle-aged figure with a long beard, beside whom is a lady in fifteenth-century head-dress. They appear to be worshipping before a priest or acolyte holding a bishop's staff. In the right-hand portion is a knight, attended by three companions, kneeling before a haloed saint, one of whose hands appears to be holding up what might

conceivably be the sacred wafer. The subject in both cases is obviously intended to illustrate the receiving of the holy communion, but in the way it is shown it is completely misleading. The small pieces surviving from the original fabric have been put together to make a pictorial whole, but without regard to the original arrangement. As explained further back, the fragments formed part of a tapestry of fourteen subjects arranged in a double tier, with a scene from the Old Testament above and the corresponding Sacrament below. Inscriptions in old Picard French help to elucidate the subjects. The inscription is usually at the top of the panel. Here it has been sewn in below, but it is explanatory of the right-hand picture, which represents Abraham after his victory kneeling before Melchizedek. In gothic tapestries, by common knowledge, all characters were depicted in the costume of the period. Warriors were in medieval armour. As a concession to verisimilitude Abraham, being an archaic personage, is garbed not in the armour of 1470, but in chain mail of more than a century earlier. He is further denoted by the letter A. The figure with a nimbus, before whom he kneels, is imported from some other piece, and does not belong there at all. It replaces the lost figure of the venerable Melchizedek, whose hands alone are seen holding out the bread and wine. There is also a morsel of his furred robe seen below. The inscription reads :—

“ De l'altel le saint Sacrement . . . ou quel
est Jhesu vraiment Melchisedech representa . . .
Quand il offrit et (reserva ?) pain et vin pour
abraham qui . . . iiii (mecreants rois ?) vainqui.”

The three lacunae in the inscription have been filled with words or parts of words which (it is stated) are actually missing from the New York fragments and do not belong here at all. They can be seen clearly in the illustration.

The group on the left are undoubtedly meant to be partaking of the sacrament, though here too an extraneous figure has been introduced. The acolyte holding the bishop's staff, as M. Rolland acutely

points out, belongs to the fragment of Confirmation in the Victoria and Albert Museum, in which the bishop has laid aside his staff to tonsure a young cleric. The group is also misplaced. Its proper arrangement is below the scene of Abraham and Melchizedek, not alongside it ; but seeing the fragmentary condition of the whole relic, and the numerous spaces filled in with painted canvas, such refinements of accuracy need not worry us unduly. Its preservation in any form is of the greatest value, especially as M. Rolland (and here we touch the key-note of his theory) sees in this left-hand group the portraits of Pasquier Grenier himself, his wife, and six of his sons, the seventh having disappeared in the course of the reconstruction. Grenier would have been about thirty years old when he was inscribed on the city roll in 1447. By 1475 he would have reached the age of 58, which fits in well enough with the bearded donor. His eldest son Jean, in the background, appears to be in the late twenties. Kneeling in the foreground are two tonsured youths, the canons Gilles and Pierre, so named in Pasquier's will. In the second row are three more children, amongst them a choir-boy swinging a censer. One head has mostly disappeared, along with the seventh child.

That this identification corresponds well with the known facts about the chapel and its dedication cannot be denied. It is difficult to suggest a better explanation of the subject, or to find a real flaw in the argument. There is against it the fact that the contemporary record of the gift to the chapel speaks of *tapetes* or *tapis* in the plural, whereas this is one tapestry. But it is a compound tapestry of several subjects, which might serve as an answer to that objection. The historical difficulties are harder to get over. There remains to be explained first the fact that the costumes, etc., all betoken a much earlier date than 1474, and secondly the tradition that these tapestries came from the chapel at Granada, and passed thence direct to M. Fortuny. I know of no data from which to answer that, nor does Mme. Crick-Kuntziger account for it except by querying the

identity of these fragments with the Fortuny ones, which is difficult to do because there seems no doubt that Albert Goupil got them from Fortuny.¹ That the St. Quentin tapestry can have found its way to the chapel in Granada is hard to credit; but somewhere or other in the history there may be an error and through this error the Grenier gift, if M. Rolland is right, and the tapestry bought by Philippe Le Bon have become confused. A possible indication of such error may be found in the fact that the Bruges tapestry was described at the time as 'moult riche,' which generally indicates the use of gold thread, or specially fine weaving, whereas these fragments are void of gold, and the pitch, or spacing, of the warps is, if anything, on the coarse side. Furthermore, the Bruges tapestry was supposed to have contained portraits of the royal house of Burgundy; but the portraits in Sir William Burrell's fragments are decidedly bourgeois and not of a princely type. I do not know what proof exists, if any, of the statement that the Fortuny fragments were thrown out from the royal chapel at Granada. It has always been believed and accepted as the truth, and there may be no reason to question it; but if this particular link in the history could be broken it would add greatly to the value of M. Rolland's theory.

¹ The Burrell fragment, despite its independent history, is firmly associated by tradition with Fortuny.