

A SPECIMEN OF THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY.

THE MAKING OF TAPESTRY.

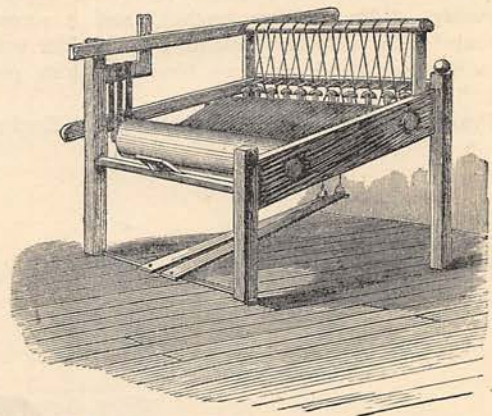


EVERYTHING connected with the making and the original manufacture of textiles appears to be lost in the mists of a great antiquity, and we can only trace the steps by which the invention was arrived at by an examination of those made in the South Sea Islands, or some such country, where the inhabitants are slowly groping their way to civilisation. By comparison of these rude attempts with the remains of some shreds of woollen stuff found in the graves of the earliest inhabitants of Britain, we discover that the plait of three strands was probably the first step in the manufacture of any textile. These plaits have been found sewn together, and a loose fabric was thus formed without a loom. A celebrated authority traces the origin of textiles to the wattled huts, which are usually the earliest attempt to form habitations amongst savage people. The weaving in and out of these reeds or wands gave the first idea of materials. The loom must have been of very early invention, however, as we find it mentioned in the Holy Scriptures; and it is probable that the first knowledge of weaving came to the Israelites from the land of Egypt. The loom of the Egyptians was upright, the weaver being able to sit at his work, by beginning to weave at the top and working downwards. In Palestine, also, the weaving was done in an upright loom; but as he began at the bottom and worked upwards he was obliged to stand.

The earliest account of hangings which we possess is that in the Book of Exodus, respecting the preparations for the sanctuary, when "the women who were wise-hearted did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun—both of blue, purple, and of scarlet, and of fine linen." Afterwards we have the description of the most exquisite of all their work, which was the embroidering of the veil which separated the Holy of Holies from the remaining portion of the Tabernacle. This hanging was of

fine white linen, but little of its original fabric was discernible amid the gorgeous tracery which covered it. It appears probable that at this period nothing was known of figure-weaving, the clothes woven being ornamented with stripes of colour, and the pattern wrought on them afterwards with the needle. A favourite method of doing embroidery amongst the Egyptians was to draw out entirely the threads of linen which formed the weft, and re-form the body of the material by working in various colours and stitches on the warp alone. In this we plainly see the forerunner of what we now call tapestry; and a few hundred years later in the Book of Proverbs we find an absolute reference to this peculiarity of its manufacture by the woman who says, "I have woven my bed with cords, I have covered it with painted tapestry brought from Egypt."

"Tapestry is neither real weaving nor true em-



LOW-WARP LOOM OF AUBUSSON AND BEAUVAIS TAPESTRY MANUFACTURERS.

broidery," says a recent authority; "but, in a manner, unites in its working these two processes into one. Though wrought in a loom, and upon a warp stretched

out upon its frame, it has no woof thrown across these threads with a shuttle, or any like appliance, but its weft is done with many short threads, all variously coloured, and put in with a needle. It is not embroidery—although so like it—for it is not worked on a real web having warp and woof, but upon a series of closely-set fine strings."

The foregoing quotation will show what the modern definition of the word "tapestry" is; the ancient meaning was much wider and more associated with the derivation of the word from the Latin *tapes*—the cover of a wall, or bed; from whence comes the French word *tapisser*—to line. Tapestry, therefore, up to the present century, meant any description of hangings—either for wall, bed, or window; whether wrought entirely with the needle, or in the loom, and of every material—whether stamped leather, printed canvas, cloth, or even paper.

The so-called "Bayeux tapestry"—so closely connected with our English history—is an example of the ancient application of the word. It is worked in different-coloured crewels on white linen, to which time has imparted the colour of brown-holland. It is worked in outline, the parts representing the flesh being left untouched. It is 227 feet long and 20 inches wide, and is believed to have been executed between the years 1066 and 1068—whether by Queen Matilda and her ladies or not, it seems difficult to decide.

From Egypt the art of tapestry-making found its way to Europe—perhaps through the Saracenic conquest of that country—being carried by the Saracens into Spain and France in A.D. 710. At any rate, we find it practised in the year A.D. 985 at St. Florent, in Saumur, where the monks of the abbey at that place wove tapestry ornamented with flowers and figures of animals. These designs were carried out in red, on a white ground—an ancient method long followed in the East, and restored in Italy at the beginning of the Renaissance. The earliest name by which tapestry was known in the Middle Ages was Saracenic work—*Opus Saracenicum*.

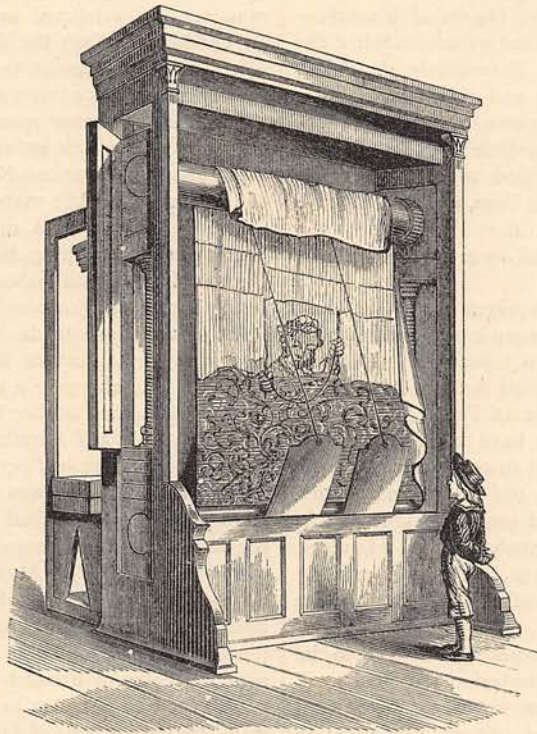
The form of the ancient Egyptian loom had been changed, and the Saracenic weaver wrought at a low, or horizontal loom; but the artisans of France and Flanders changed to the upright, or vertical frame, which was afterwards known abroad as *haute lisse*, in

contradistinction to the horizontal, or low frame, called *basse lisse*. Workmen who kept to the unimproved loom were known in the trade as "Saracens," retaining the method of work which had been learnt from their paynim teachers, while their work was called Saracenic. With the new as well as with the old frame, the weaver had to grope on his path a great deal in the dark. In both of them he was obliged to put in the threads on the back, or wrong side of the piece, following his sketch as best he could behind the strings or warp. As the face was downward in the flat frame, it was much less easy to observe or correct a fault. In the upright frame he might stand in front, and with his own work in open view on one

hand and the original design on the other, he could mend, as he went, the smallest mistake. The work done in the upright frame far exceeded in beauty and perfection that from the flat frame. Arras is another name by which tapestry was known later on in the Middle Ages; and by this it is constantly mentioned in books.

At first the manufacture of tapestry was one of the manual labours followed in religious houses, and the monks were some of the best workers. The walls of the churches were hung with it, and so choice was it considered that crowned heads were the only other private possessors.

It is not easy for us to realise how valuable hangings and tapestry were in those old days, when the bad finishing



THE UPRIGHT LOOM.

and the lack of plastering admitted innumerable draughts of cold air—when there was no other means of covering the bare stone walls. The castles and palaces must have been comfortless indeed; and when we remember the bare floors strewn with rushes, the lack of furniture, the wide chimneys, and the badly-fitting doors and windows, we can only marvel how the occupants lived in them at all, more especially if the climate were—as it is said to have been—much worse than at the present time. The tapestries did not remain on the walls, but were hung on the hooks provided for them round the top, just below the ceiling, only when the rooms were inhabited. They were also sometimes suspended on frames which stood at a little distance from the walls, and thus afforded the means for persons to conceal themselves behind

them, as we read of their doing in old books and historical novels.

It was the office of the Grooms of the Chamber to hang up the tapestries which, in a royal progress, were sent forward with the purveyor; and several amusing stories are told of the blunders committed by functionaries who had "no heads on their shoulders." The Duc de Sully records one in his "Memoirs" concerning the visit of the Cardinal Legate of Florence to the Castle of St. Germain-en-Laye, in the reign of Henri IV. of France. The keeper of the castle had received orders to hang the halls and chambers with the finest tapestry of the Crown. He executed the orders given with great punctuality, but with so little judgment that he hung the legate's chamber with a suit of hangings made for the Queen of Navarre—very rich, but full of emblems and mottoes against the Pope and the Roman Court. Fortunately, the duke's anxiety led him to take horse and ride fast, in order to arrive before the expected guest, when he saw the blunder and altered it immediately. The legate, of course, would have not failed to look upon the mistake as a design to insult him, and would have represented it as such to the Pope, when the negotiations in progress would have come to a premature end.

The corporation of master workers in the Saracenic style had preserved their low-warp looms and opposed the manufacture of high-warp tapestries. The two styles of manufacture were united in the year 1302 by the Provost of the Merchants of Paris, and the industry afterwards appears to have been most prosperous, until it became extinct in consequence of the war with the English called the "Hundred Years' War." And so for nearly 300 years the seat of this famous manufacture was transferred to Flanders, until it was driven from thence, back to France, by the exactions and bloody rule of the Spaniards under the infamous Duke of Alva.

The history of Flemish tapestry has yet to be written, but when it finds its historian few books will surpass it in interest. To these towns, for three centuries, came all the kings and princes of Europe to purchase storied tapestries for the decoration of churches and palaces, and the workers in the art formed the most distinguished corporation of that nation of weavers. The great Jacques van Artevelde belonged to one of the well-known families of the weavers' guild, and the influence exercised by Flemish art upon Europe was paramount; and when the manufacturers of tapestry abandoned the primitive subjects they had been accustomed to produce, and called for subjects from painters, the great masters, Raphael and Giulio Romano in the South, and Lucas van Leyden, Roger van der Weyden, and Jan Mabuse, and a host of others in the North, furnished designs to be carried out by the Flemish weavers. It says not a little for the skill of these men that they were able to keep pace with the vast strides made in Italian art under the influence of the great masters of the Renaissance, and they were entrusted by foreign sovereigns with the execution of magnificent hang-

ings, the designs for which were drawn by Italian painters. It was to the manufacturers of Brussels that Pope Leo X. applied for the reproduction of the Cartoons of Raphael for the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. These compositions, representing the acts of our Blessed Lord and His apostles, have been in part preserved, thanks to King Charles I. of England, who bought them, at the suggestion of Rubens, from a manufactory in Brussels. They were brought from Hampton Court Palace some years ago, and are now exhibited at the South Kensington Museum. Brussels was the inheritor of the fame of "Arras," the prosperity of that town being destroyed when it was taken by Louis XI. in 1477. It was from Arras, however, that the great part of the most ancient specimens remaining in existence originated, and no pieces of an earlier date than the fifteenth century are extant. The last of the Flemish tapestry-masters is supposed to have closed his *ateliers* in 1784.

Much in the same manner that England became possessed of the silk industry—through the religious persecutions in France—France became the inheritor of the famous artistic manufactories of Flanders after the religious wars and the cruelty of Spanish rule, which gave a crushing blow to them; for although Francis I. had established a manufactory of high-warp tapestry at Fontainebleau, and Henri II. one at Paris in the Hospice de la Trinité, the grand era of its general manufacture must be fixed in the reign of Henri IV., who gave a new and permanent impulse to the last-named *atelier* by importing into it workmen from Italy and Flanders. This king established no less than three *ateliers* of tapestry altogether, and to him France also owes the foundation of a manufactory of carpets, called "Turkey-stitch," the first beginnings of that famous carpet manufactory called the "Savonnerie." Most of these manufactures appear to have been gathered together in the galleries of the Louvre, where the king frequently visited them. The first Gobelins manufactory began in 1603 with a colony of Flemish workmen, which the king transported to a house in the suburbs of Paris, that was built and occupied for more than two centuries by a family of the name of Gobelines, who brought to Paris, in the reign of Francis I., the secret of dyeing a most beautiful scarlet colour, which was called by their name. Eighty looms were set up under the direction of De Comans and De la Planche; and if we may judge from the entries in the Memoirs of Sully, that famous Minister found the demands of the new importations excessive, and the money paid to them beyond their deserts. However, he very sensibly says that he is "but an indifferent judge, as these things are not at all to his taste." Henry appears to have paid the Flemings no less a sum than £100,000.

During the reigns of Louis XIII. and Louis XIV. these different establishments produced some remarkable hangings; but it was only under the administration of the great Minister Colbert that the French manufactories of tapestry eclipsed, by their magnificent productions, those of Flanders. This Minister

united the different *ateliers* at the Maison des Gobelins, which was purchased by the king in 1667; and from that time to the present this manufactory has ranked as the first in the world. The great painter Lebrun was placed at the head of the works and gave a great impulse to its activity, although his fault in designing seemed to be in the endeavour to enter into competition with painting, by the addition of half-tints, of which time has destroyed the harmony. From that period to the present, the best painters of the day have been employed to make designs and patterns, besides painting pictures, which were afterwards reproduced in tapestry. At the present moment, however, the Gobelins have ceased copying pictures, and prefer obtaining from special artists patterns in which a simple composition and a free touch are combined. A more satisfactory general effect is thus produced, and a great economy of time and money secured. The manufactory of the "Savonnerie" was united to the Gobelins in 1826, and the manufacture of carpets has greatly benefited by the union.

In 1669, the Minister Colbert gathered some ancient *ateliers* at Beauvais together into a manufactory of low-warp tapestry, intended for the decoration of the furniture of the royal palaces and the making of *portières* and small hangings. And when, at the end of the eighteenth century, they ceased to use low-warp looms at the Gobelins, they were sent to Beauvais, which has ever since remained the sole *atelier* of that manufacture. Throughout all the revolutions of France these two manufactories have never been closed, although their respective fortunes have been at the lowest ebb. In 1804 they again came under State control, and a school of drawing and one of tapestry were both established. The invariable support given them by the successive Governments of France has enabled them to withstand all the changes of fashion, which in private life resulted in the abolition of tapestry as a form of decoration, and thenceforth its use was limited to the State palaces—the State alone being able to pay the sums required for them, which far exceeded the limits of moderate or even of great incomes. The last movement made in advance was to open a public exhibition in Paris of the history of tapestry in August, 1876, to which the South Kensington Museum contributed some of its fine examples; and a commission was appointed, which drew up a remarkable report, and a plan of reform and improvement in twelve heads. As these contain much general information, it is best to subjoin them.

1. In future no tapestry will be executed at the Gobelins manufactory except from copies or cartoons produced expressly for that purpose.

2. The compositions for tapestries will be submitted to public competitions as far as possible.

3. A competition will take place every year between the pupils of the Gobelins manufactory who have served three years' apprenticeship. The Minister of Fine Arts in France will provide the laureates with the means of pursuing for two years a course of study in the School of Fine Arts.

4. In the manufactory itself greater care will be given to the study of drawing, and the theoretic principles of the art of tapestry will be taught.

5. Reform in the method of executing the tapestries, which will be much more simple in future.

6 and 7. A considerable diminution in the manufacture of velvet pile carpets, and the entire suppression of the velvet-pile fabric as applied to furniture.

8. The re-establishment of a course of chemistry as applied to dyeing, and of a laboratory to which outside pupils can be admitted.

9. The formation of a museum in the manufactory, where old and new copies may be exhibited for the purposes of study.

10. A very desirable supplement to these reforms would be the establishment of a museum of decorative art, in a central situation outside the walls of the Gobelins manufactory.

As Rules 11 and 12 have only reference to the executing of private orders and pecuniary matters they need not be quoted. Enough, however, has been said to show that the French Government are fully in earnest in their determination to form the present Gobelins manufactory into a State school of instruction, not only in drawing and designing as applied to textiles, but in dyeing and chemistry, and in every branch of decorative art.

While the hangings, furniture-covers, and *portières* made at the Gobelins and at Beauvais were solely for the use of crowned heads and the State, we are most affected at the present moment, perhaps, by the manufactories at Aubusson, which provided the general public with tapestries, and which originated the manufacture and use of carpets as we now have the comfort of them. This establishment appears to have been founded in the fourteenth century by some Flemish workmen, who, working from the designs of native artists, used the short-fleeced wool of the country. The tapestries were made in large quantities, and were sold at moderate prices. Here also we find the helping hand of the Minister Colbert, for in 1669 he induced the king to sign a charter, which may be called the foundation of the prosperities of Aubusson. This—in addition to other permissions and rights—entirely prohibited the introduction into France of foreign productions, and so left the way clear for the tapestries of the town, which flourished and prospered exceedingly. During the revolutionary wars, the manufacturers—seeing that there would be no demand for some time for expensive and grand works—set to work to produce carpets and common tapestry, thus finding occupation for their workmen, and commencing—although unknown to themselves—a manufacture of goods which should be used throughout the known world.

There are records in history of Italian manufactories at Ferrara, Turin, Rome, Florence, and Naples. Those at Rome and Turin still survive. There was also one at Madrid, at Munich, Berne, Berlin, and Copenhagen, and one at Constantinople, which produced some very fine works. All these were originated by Flemish workmen and were inspired by Flemish art, so there is little to notice concerning them.

Even from this short and condensed description, the importance of tapestry in the history of our textiles can be gathered. In fact, as we look round our comfortable houses, we have to thank these ancient workers for nearly everything that makes "the house beautiful." Carpets, rugs, curtains, hangings, *portières*, and bed-coverings all had their origin in the "storied tapestries" of long-ago times.