



A South German Tapestry

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A South German Tapestry

T IS INDEED a matter for congratulation that the first German tapestry¹ to be acquired for the Museum should be an outstanding example of an important period in the history of European tapestry weaving. The purchase of this tapestry, once a part of the Sigmaringen-Hohenzollern Collection, was made possible through a fund established by the bequest of Charles Potter Kling.

Though precise dating of the tapestry from evidence now available is not possible, there are many reasons to believe that it was woven sometime during the last decade of the fourteenth century, or the first decade of the fifteenth century.

The subject of the tapestry, startlingly at variance with the subjects of other tapestries in the Museum's collection, presents an enticing iconographic puzzle. Beginning at the left hand end of this long, narrow strip of tapestry, probably intended to hang above a row of benches, we follow the actions of strange bearded men clothed in handsomely styled renderings of the traditional hairy covering of the mythological "wild man." Armed with stones and branches, the wild men approach a moated castle defended by dusky Moors. From the upper windows of the castle the king and queen watch the approaching horde. The attackers, in contrast to the dark-skinned defenders, are giants; but though the danger seems overwhelming, the drawbridge is down and two bowmen advance towards the invaders.

To the right beyond the castle a wild man crowned with flowers struggles with a lion; two wild men attack a winged dragon; while still farther to the right another wild man grasps the horn and right leg of a spotted unicorn in an effort to subdue him. The small trees which punctuate these incidents have smooth, sinuous brown trunks, each species of tree indicated by the variations of the elaborate polychrome patterns of the tuft of leaves at the top. Birds flock to one tree to feed on its berries, and tailless brown apes climb the trunk and play in the branches of another. Beyond the apes, a wild man mounted on a stag rides proudly on. Two wild men bring offerings, spoils of the chase, to a wild woman who with two children is seated on the foot of a stylized pyramidal hill. Subtly calculated irregularities in the angular rock formations of the hill, from which grow small trees and flowering plants, give variety to a composition which frames and focuses attention on this strange family scene. The head of the wild woman, her fair hair crowned with leaves, is silhouetted against the rosy shadows of the rocks. The foreground is patterned with small varicolored mounds, each framing a stylized plant, while at intervals rabbits and other small animals are seen emerging from behind the little mounds.

These wild people are outside the clearly defined boundaries of the medieval feudal hierarchy. Their rank and place in society is not shown by the style of their garments. They are clothed, if we may so describe the delicate patterning by which the forms of their bodies are delineated, in soft garments striped gray, cream, pink, yellow, brown and green in a manner to suggest delicately dyed furs. The two wild men who approach the wild woman, one half kneeling as he offers an animal's leg to the woman; the other slightly bent under the weight of a dead lion on his back, merely by the angles of their bodies, complete the frame and background for the woman with her children, continuing and supporting the rocky hill as the apex of the triangle.

The traditions in art, literature and living folklore of these strange wild beings have been brilliantly explored and recorded by Richard Bernheimer in *Wild Men of the Middle Ages*.² In this study, with other tapestries belonging to this group, the tapestry *Wild Men and Moors*, now in our collection, is illustrated and discussed.³ Though wild men have been considered to be embodiments of passion and evil, or as men who, victims of a cruel fate, have lost their minds, the darker aspects of these legendary creatures, half man, half animal, scarcely touch the wild men of the tapestries. In tapestries of this group which were woven in southern Germany, in Alsace, along the upper reaches of the Rhine and in adjacent areas of Switzerland, the persons portrayed have escaped the limits of their rank and station in the complicated feudal system, and returned to nature.

From the point of view of decoration and diversion, we need no explanation or justification of these wild men; and surely these were factors of primary importance to the unknown designer of our tapestry. Though it is tempting to seek symbolic meanings in the figures and scenes represented, there is real danger of endowing them with significance never intended. However, I believe there is a logical explanation for the appearance of wild men in tapestries woven in Alsace and Switzerland during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Hermann Schmitz,⁴ who calls it the most beautiful tapestry of this type, attributes it to the first half of the fifteenth century. The date given by Betty Kurth⁵ is 1390–1410. Heinrich Göbel⁶ dates it from the beginning of the fifteenth century, while Emil Major,⁷ whose publication is the most recent, believes our *Wild Men* tapestry was woven about 1390. All consider it to be South German, and all except Schmitz attribute it to Alsatian looms. Major is more specific, ascribing our tapestry to the city of Strasbourg. Evidence for both the date and origin of the tapestry is to be found in the forms and blazonry on the three helmets with crests and mantlings and on the single shield which appear at intervals along the lower edge of the tapestry. Two well-known patrician families of Strasbourg are represented by the arms, and the form of the helmets and crests points to a date not later than the early years of the fifteenth century, though an earlier date seems more probable.

On the shield seen below the wild man riding on a stag, the arms of Blümel (Blümlein) are displayed. The shield is divided horizontally: in the upper half are two red roses on a gold (yellow) ground, the lower half is black. The same arms appear as the crest with mantling below the wild man who struggles with a dragon. The two other helmets with crests and mantling display the arms of one of the branches of the Zorn family. Siebmacher⁸ gives thirty variations of the Zorn crest

as born by different branches of the Zorns of Alsace. This crest has been used by both the family of Zorn von Bulach, and the family of Zorn von Plobsheim. These are similar to the arms as they appeared on their shields, but reversed, and the crest terminates in a golden ram's horn. Related representations of shields and helmets with crests and mantling are to be found in fourteenth century German illuminated manuscripts, a characteristic example being the *Mannessa Codex*, Heidelberg University Library, no. 848.

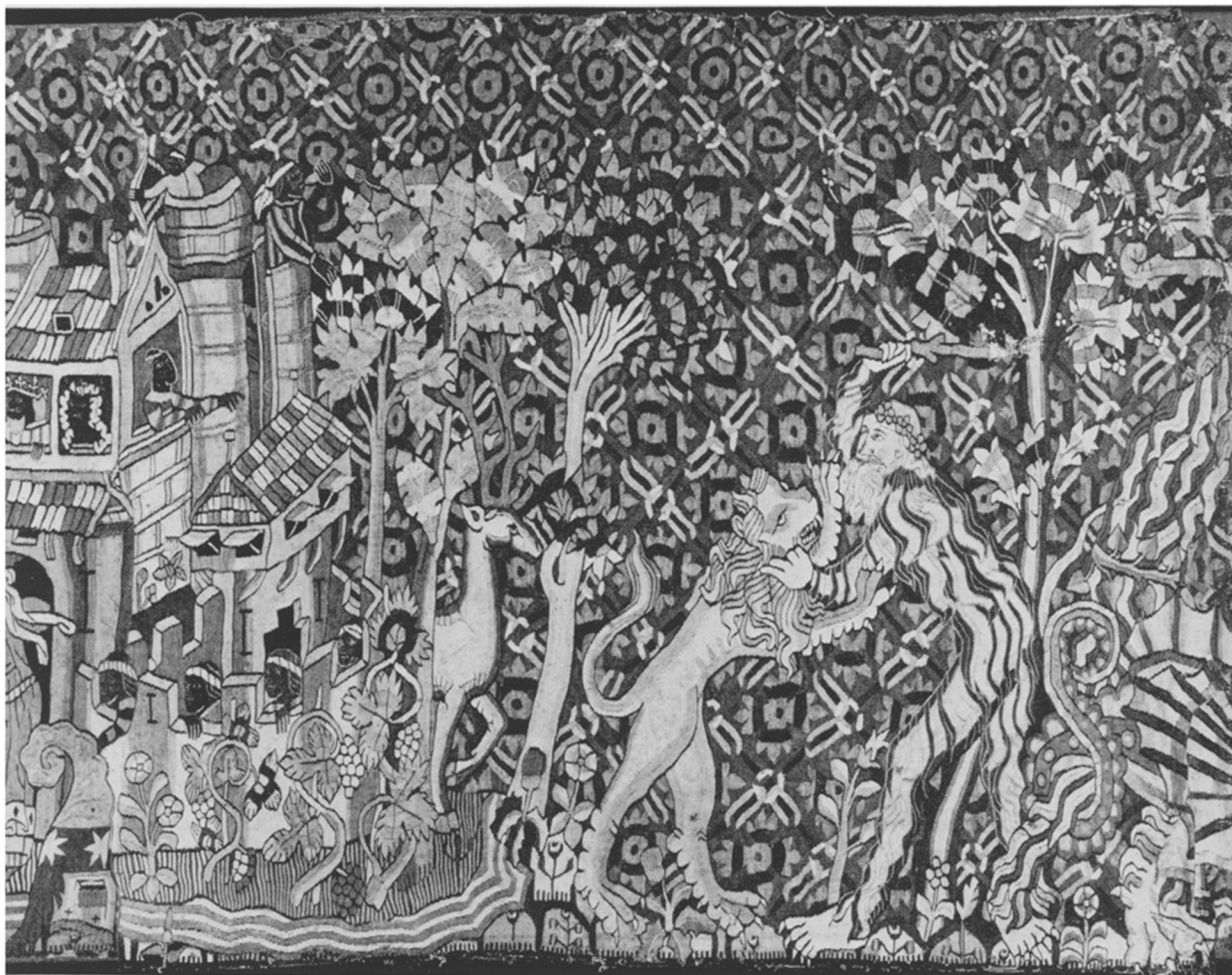
Siebmacher refers to the Blümel family as already in 1415 being known as a noble patrician family, and concerning the Zorns he states that it is one of the oldest and most famous of the families of Alsace. Records of both the Zorn and the Blümel families appear in the *Inventaire Sommaire des Archives Communales de la Ville de Strasbourg antérieures à 1790*, transcribed by J. Brucker, *Archiviste*, and published in Strasbourg in 1878. Though the Zorns are to be found in the *Archives* as active in the affairs of the city of Strasbourg as early as 1296, and are mentioned repeatedly in this summary of the city's records, the first notice of a Blümel does not come until 1425–1426. This may be because earlier records of the Blümel family had been destroyed.

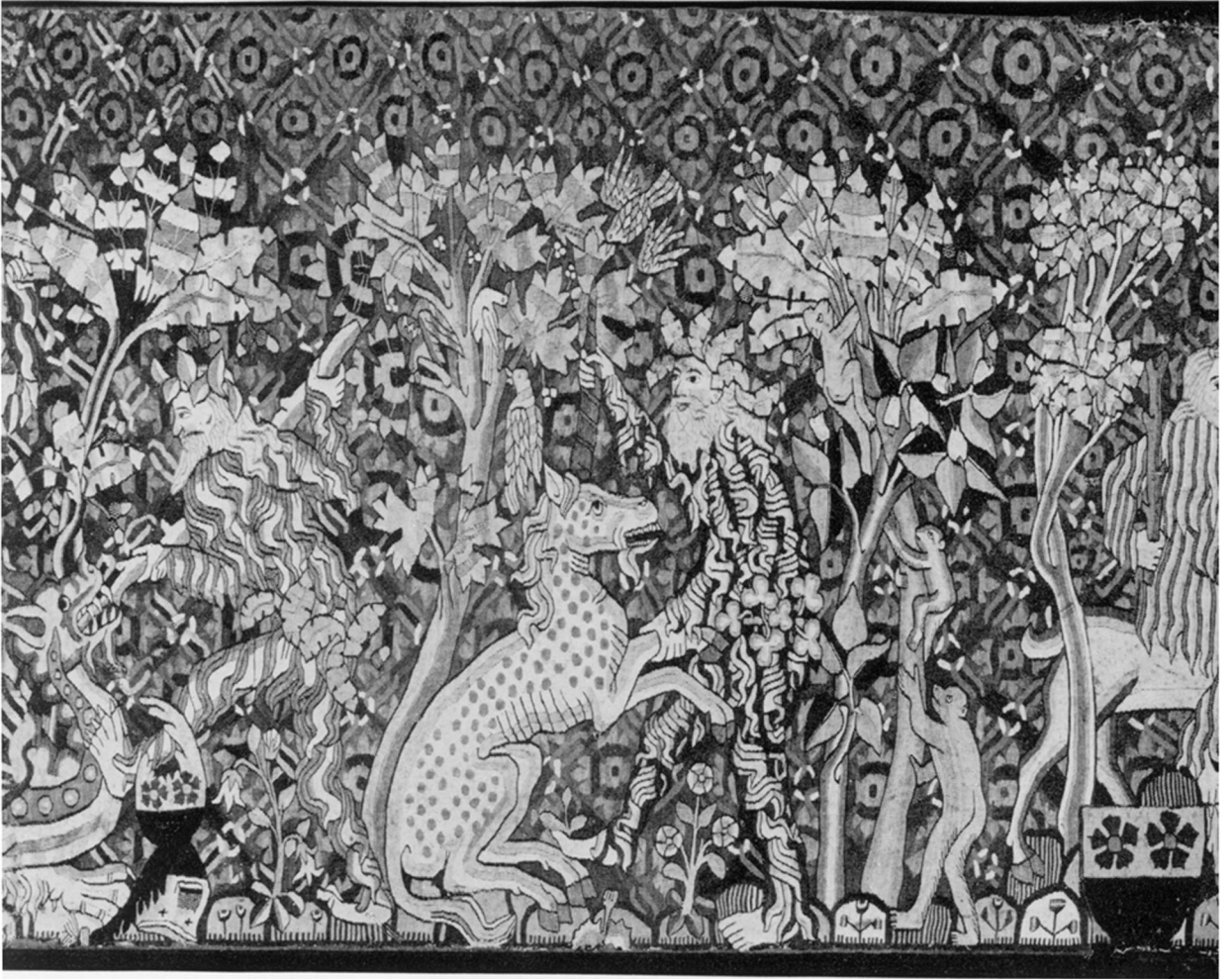
The appearance of the coats of arms of two families on a tapestry suggests very naturally the possibility that the tapestry celebrates a marriage. Both Dr. Kurth and Dr. Major consider this probable, but were unsuccessful in finding records of an alliance by marriage between the Blümels and Zorns during the years to which the weaving of the tapestry has been attributed. It seems to me, however, not impossible that the arms of the two families on this tapestry record an alliance other than a marriage. It is true that heraldic practices in Germany have differed from those followed in France and England, where it was usual to display the arms of a woman on a lozenge-shaped shield, rather than on a shield of the form carried in battle or in tournaments. Among contemporary French records we find that in 1395 Nicolas Bataille of Paris wove a tapestry for Isabeau de Bavière, wife of Charles VI of France, in the middle of which there was a lozenge emblazoned with the queen's arms.⁹ In the marriage tapestry of Zorn and Böcklin, circa 1475, ornamented with six shields, there is only one crest. In each corner of this tapestry there is an armorial shield, while two shields side by side in the centre are surmounted by one crest. If on our *Wild Men* tapestry the Zorn family was represented by their arms on helmets, and the Blümels only by an armorial shield, I would be prepared to believe, since German practice is followed, that it could be a marriage tapestry. I realize that I have not complete evidence; nevertheless, I doubt whether this is a marriage tapestry.

Alsace, though it had its place within the loosely organized framework of the Holy Roman Empire, took active part during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in a succession of confederations or leagues of cities in the west of Germany, along the Rhine, and in neighbouring Switzerland. That in the end these efforts to form democratic states for defence and commerce failed in Germany while they succeeded in Switzerland does not alter the fact that during this period traditional social barriers were broken down in the whole area. In Strasbourg in 1379 the nobles, to retain their rights as citizens, were required to renounce many of their privileges as patricians. Do we not find in this equalizing of classes, even though temporary, a possible explanation of the popularity in both Alsace and Switzerland of wild men

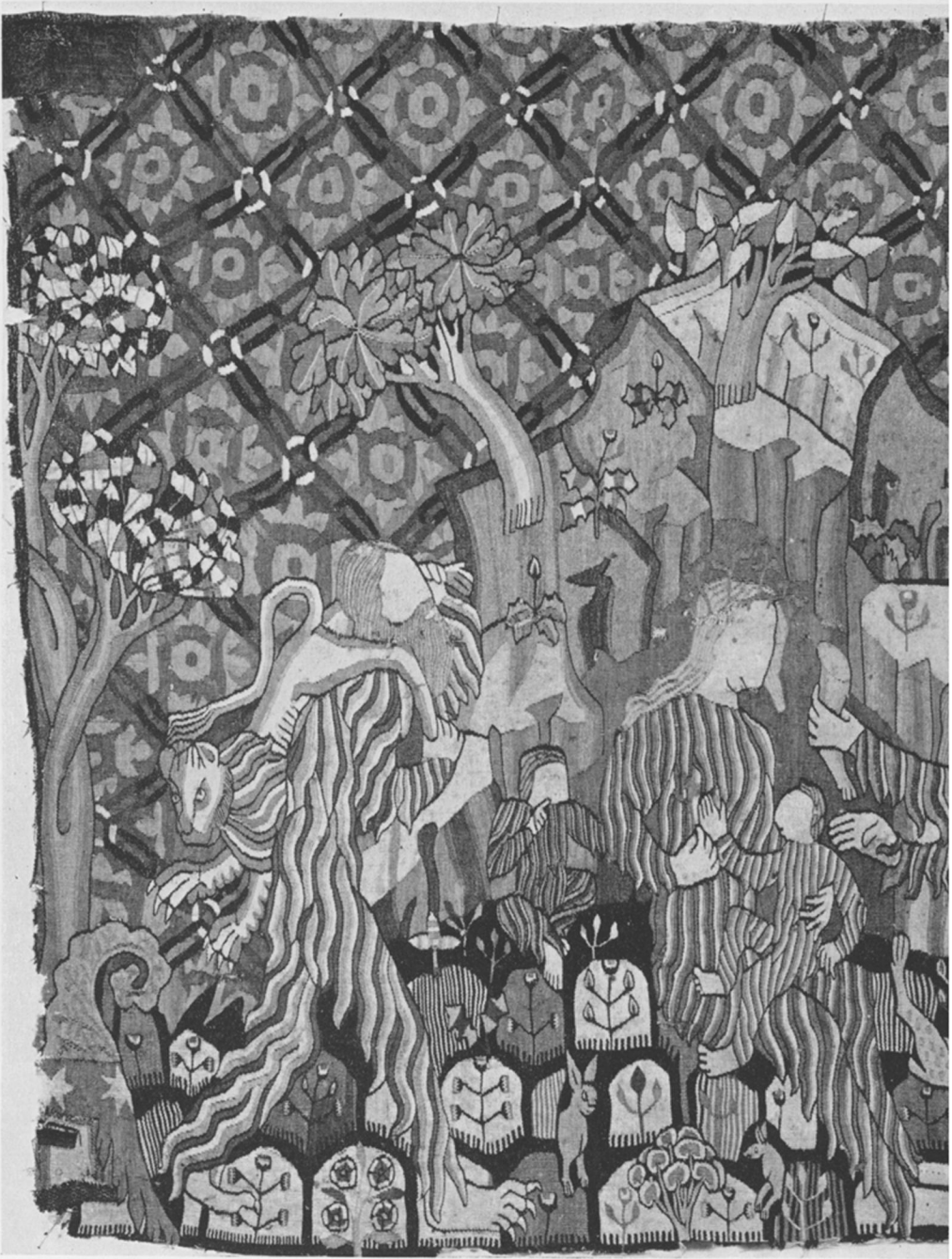


1. *Wild Men and Moors*, Tapestry,
South German, ca. 1400
Charles Potter Kling Fund. 54.1431











2. *Wild Men and Moors*, Tapestry (detail of reverse),
South German, ca. 1400
Charles Potter Kling Fund. 54.1431

as subjects for tapestry? Wild men could be shown taking part in all social activities without being labelled by the fashion of their garments, and thus placed within the rigid framework of their inherited position in the feudal system.

One well-known fifteenth century tapestry showing wild men, which is in the Church of Notre Dame de Nantilly in Saumur on the Loire, called the *Bal des Sauvages*, is not in any way related to the German and Swiss tapestries peopled by wild men and their families. The scene shown in the Saumur tapestry is a fancy dress ball. The social position of the guests is demonstrated by elaborate headdresses, and the tapestry can be dated by these and other fashionable accessories. It was at one such ball held in Paris in 1392 that the king, Charles VI, almost lost his life. A group of young men, of which he was one, disguised as wild men, planned a dance which ended in death for many of them after a torch, brought too near, ignited the furry covering of hemp attached to their bodies with pitch. As fancy dress, that of "wild men" apparently continued in favor at least as late as 1815, when Maria Edgeworth reports being frightened at a fancy ball in Dublin by "thatched 'Wild Men from the North,' dancing and stamping with whips and clumping of feet."

This consideration of "wild men" at fancy dress balls is only a digression since it is the political and social developments during the fourteenth century in Alsace which seem to me significant in accounting for the popularity of "wild men" as a subject for tapestries. Political and social developments also offer a possible explanation for an association other than marriage between two or more leading Alsatian families, and therefore may be an explanation for the arms on the tapestry.

Of course we do not know whether other arms once appeared on our tapestry, since we do not know how much larger the tapestry was originally. During the middle ages it was customary in listing tapestries to refer to a tapestry of so many pieces forming complete hangings for a room. The bottom of our *Wild Men* tapestry, although ragged in some places, shows the original finished edge. It has been cut at both ends and also across the top, though it is improbable that the tapestry was ever much higher. At the left end there is a curious barber-pole band round which peers a lion, his muzzle and one large eye visible, like an amateur stagehand looking out from the wings at the audience.

The everyday life of the people of the late fourteenth century and of the fifteenth century can be followed through the activities of wild men and their families, as shown in German and Swiss tapestries. The pleasures of the wild man, his games and family life are vividly portrayed in a long band of tapestry in the Rathaus in Regensburg,¹⁰ believed by Betty Kurth to date from the same period as the Museum's *Wild Men* tapestry, that is, between 1390 and 1400. In the Regensburg tapestry wild men and wild women and their children can be seen hunting, cooking, building, courting and playing boisterous games. In the Museum of Art and Industry in Vienna the work of farmers, as carried on by gaily stylized wild people, is shown in a tapestry¹¹ dating from about 1470.

There are three tapestries,¹² however, which are of especial interest in relation to our *Wild Men* tapestry. These are three from the same cartoon which show a curious variation of the subject of our tapestry. In all three there is a moated castle attacked by wild men mounted on strange animals, and in all three a wild woman wearing

a crown is being offered food and drink by attendant wild men. The design of these tapestries differs from that of our *Wild Men* in several particulars. In all three the castle being attacked is defended by wild men, not Moors, and the wild woman to whom food and drink is offered is seated under an elaborately decorated tent, not on an open hillside. The tapestries, one of which is in Vienna, one in Nuremberg and one in Wartburg, have been attributed by Betty Kurth to Alsace and to the first third of the fifteenth century. A technical peculiarity to be found in all three of these tapestries and in the Museum's *Wild Men* is the manner in which the faces are woven. While the animals are completely delineated in weaving, the faces of the wild men and wild women, and in the case of our tapestry, the faces of the Moors, were woven without features, and the outlines of the features applied afterwards by painting or embroidery. The features in our tapestry are painted, though there are traces of embroidery stitches on the faces of the Moors. A photograph of the back of the tapestry shows the fine quality of the weaving and the expert manner in which, unlike most European tapestry weaving, the back of the web is finished. There are no loose ends of yarn, and no yarns are carried from one place to another. Naturally the back of a tapestry cannot be seen when it is hung on a wall, and a photograph of the back of a tapestry is seldom published. However, the reverse side of a German tapestry-woven cushion-cover dating from the first half of the fifteenth century, which is in Vienna, is illustrated¹³ by Betty Kurth. This shows a more normal finish with a considerable number of threads carried on the back between nearby areas of the same color.

The three tapestries already described, which are divided between Vienna, Nuremberg, and Wartburg, in which wild men attack castles, and which are similar in several particulars to our tapestry, have been described by Richard Bernheimer as "wild men battling for the castle of love," and by Betty Kurth as "wilden Leuten und Minneburg." These titles refer to the allegorical siege of the Castle of Love which was a popular subject in art and literature during the thirteenth century,¹⁴ and was dramatically embodied in the festival at Treviso as related by Rolandino of Padua. If the tapestry now hanging in our Museum is another of the *Minneburg* tapestries, the appearance of Moors as defenders of the Castle of Love seems to need some explanation. At this period in European painting, except for the third Wise Man in the Adoration of the Magi, one seldom sees a dark-skinned personage. Searching for fore-runners of our Moors in German poetry we find in the story of Parzival, as told by Wolfram von Eschenbach, a curious variation of the French legend from which it was derived. There is a preliminary book in which the poet tells how Gahmuret, son of the King of Anjou, leaves his country and after adventures in the service of the Caliph of Bagdad is driven by a storm to the land of the Moors, where he marries their black queen, *diese schwarze Möhrin, des Mohrenlandes Königen*. Later he deserts her and, after returning to France, marries the widowed queen, Herzeleide. After his departure the Moorish queen gives birth to a son she calls Feirefiss, whose skin is both black and white. Parzival born to Gamuret and Herzeleide is, therefore, the younger half-brother of Feirefiss. Though this appearance of dark-skinned Moors in German poetry does not explain the Moors who defend the Castle of Love in our tapestry, nevertheless, to a degree and in a sense, it may account for them.

Returning to our *Wild Men* tapestry let us examine the brilliant, formal, all-over pattern behind its varied and enigmatic scenes. It is crimson with pale pink roses enclosed in a diamond lattice framework formed by linked chains; the long links, alternately light and dark blue, are connected by round cream-colored links. Though this background pattern may be derived from an armorial blazon, it seems to be possible, even probable, that the chains symbolize the chains of love holding captive the rose of love. The proportions and distribution of color in the pattern suggest both the illuminated backgrounds of illustrations of early fourteenth century manuscript copies of Arthurian legends, and the background of medieval stained glass windows.

Though references can be found to tapestry weaving in Strasbourg during the fourteenth century, the designers of the tapestries are still unidentified. In *Les Artistes de l'Alsace au Moyen Age* by Charles Gérard¹⁵ there are relatively few records, dating from the fourteenth century, of painters who might have also been designers of tapestries. Referring to the *peintre-verrier* Jean de Kircheim, who worked about the middle of the fourteenth century, the author states that after his death, and until 1400, no information concerning the painters of glass of the School of Strasbourg has survived. *Un oubli profond enveloppe leurs noms et leurs enveloppera toujours, si quelque document inattendu, encore enfoui dans la poudre de quelque archive, ne vient un jour nous les révéler.*¹⁶ Although the same profound oblivion envelopes the name and history of the designer of our *Wild Men* tapestry, his work speaks for itself. We may not understand all the curious connotations of the scenes he illustrates, but we can enjoy the rhythm and color, and the felicity with which the design has been rendered by the weavers.

GERTRUDE TOWNSEND

NOTES:

1. M.F.A. 54.1431. Warp: linen, 7 to cm. Weft: wool. (The darkest value is a very dark blue, used to give the effect of black). Height: 1M. Width: 4M90.
2. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1952.
3. Bernheimer, Richard, *The Wild Men of the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1952, fig. 45, p. 147.
4. *Bildteppiche*, Berlin, 1919, fig. 32, p. 80.
5. *Die Deutschen Bildteppiche des Mittelalters*, Vienna, 1926, Vol. I, p. 231. Vol. II, pls. 108-109.
6. *Wandteppiche*, Berlin, 1933, Part III, Vol. I, pl. 59.
7. *Strassburger Bildteppiche aus gotischer Zeit*, Basel, n.d., p. 12, pls. 1-3.
8. *J. Siebmacher's grosses und allgemeines Wap-penbuch*, edited by Otto von Hefner, Nurem-berg, 1858.
9. Guiffrey, J.-J., *Nicholas Bataille*, Paris, 1884, p. 44.
10. Kurth, Betty, op. cit. Vol. II, pls. 110-112.
11. *ibid.* Vol. II, pls. 59-63.
12. *ibid.* Vol. II, pls. 115-119.
13. *ibid.* Vol. III, pl. 332.
14. *The Journal of the Archaeological Institute of America*, second series, Vol. XXIII, 1919. "The Allegorical Siege of the Art of the Middle Ages," by Roger Loomis, pp. 255-269.
15. Colmar and Paris, 1872.
16. Gérard, Charles, op. cit. Vol. II, p. 21.