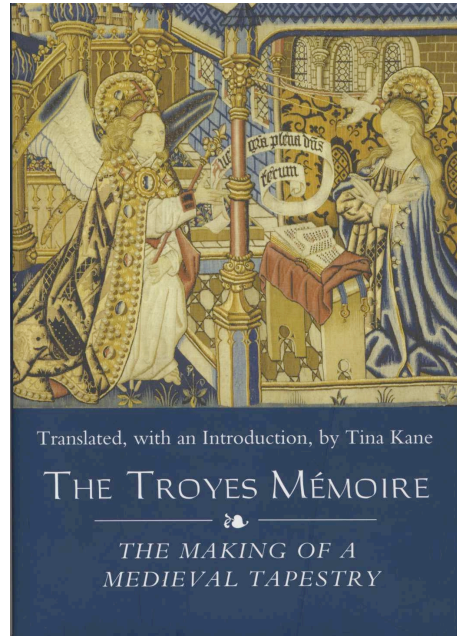


# THE TROYES MÉMOIRE: THE MAKING OF A MEDIEVAL TAPESTRY

Tina Kane



In 1968, as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, in Comparative Literature, I had never heard of textile conservation. At the time, I was renting a room in the Berkeley hills. The owners of the house had a beautiful collection of Navajo (or Diné) blankets, which caught my interest. By coincidence, that same year I was with friends in Santa Fe, New Mexico, who introduced me to a young Diné man, a student at St. Johns University. At some point I asked him where I could find out more about how Navajo rugs were made, and he generously offered to show me. His mother was a well-known weaver and he had worked with her. I had no idea how fortunate I was. The Diné were not eager to share the secrets of their crafts at that time, especially weaving, which is a sacred art. Their mythology has it that Spider Man taught them to

make their looms from sunshine, lightning and rain. The day I learned to weave in the Diné way I was introduced to a new world, and my life changed.

I began to weave when I could. My early efforts were heartfelt but not skillful. Over time my technique improved. Fortunately, now living near New York, I could earn money translating and teaching French. But as I improved as a weaver I began to sell my weavings. Some time later, a friend brought me a beautiful Navajo blanket with a hole in it. It was a gift for his bride and he wanted it repaired. If I knew how to make new weavings, he reasoned, then I should be able fix old weavings. I didn't know the first thing about it, but I was intrigued. First, I wove a plug and inserted it, but that looked awful. Then it occurred to me there must be a logical way to replace damaged warps and wefts. It took me about twenty-four hours to figure it out but, in the end, my friend was pleased. To my delight, and consternation, I discovered that restoring three inches of someone else's rug paid me more than weaving three feet of my own. I added "restoration" to my business and gradually it became my main activity.

In 1972 a client brought me a damaged seventeenth-century French tapestry. I did the best I could with it but immediately started looking for someone in New York who knew more about these things than I. As a result, I was eventually hired by Nobuko Kajitani, the Head of the recently opened Textile Conservation Department at the Metropolitan Museum. She was then engaged in

the preparatory stages of a tapestry conservation project that would become my primary work during the thirty years I worked at the Met as a conservator of medieval tapestry.



*Christ is Born as Man's Redeemer*

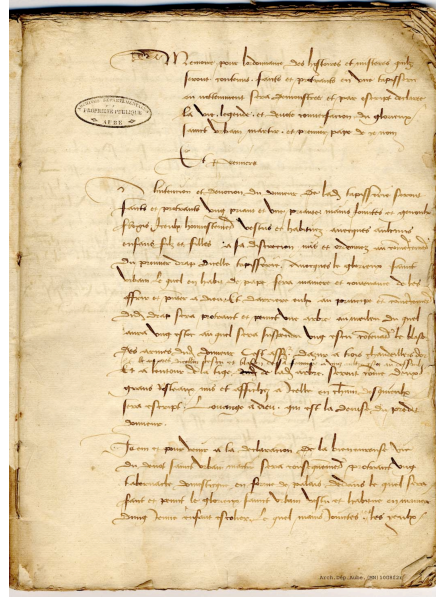
Early 16<sup>th</sup> Century Flemish tapestry in the Cloisters Collection of the Metropolitan Museum

The tapestry I worked on belonged to The Cloisters branch of The Metropolitan Museum. It was one of ten panels in an important design series entitled *Redemption of Man*. These large tapestries (8m x 4m approximately or 25' by 14') constituted a complex visual narrative beginning with the Creation and concluding with the Last Judgment. The Cloisters' tapestry portrayed events surrounding the birth of Christ, the *Nativity*. The tapestry had multiple problems, not least of which was that, at some time in its history, it had been vandalized and cut into four pieces. My job, along with my colleagues, was to put it back together, and clarify and restore the images so it was once again legible. To do this I had to understand

what, and even whom, I was looking at. And this, in turn, led me to a study of iconography and narratology in tapestry. (For more on this, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pf3usSyHVXs>.)



I became fascinated with how these tapestries worked as visual narrative. Who informed the artists designing the tapestries about the iconography? Who said, for instance, put the devil here and the magi over there? In addition, I wondered who these extraordinarily skilled weavers were, what their lives consisted of, and what it was like to collaborate on such a project. I read everything I could find on the subject and soon came across several quotations excerpted from two medieval French manuscripts that seemed to shed light on my questions. This ultimately took me to the Archives in Troyes, France, where these manuscripts, the Troyes *Mémoire* and the Account Books of the Church of Sainte-Madeleine, are preserved.



The first folio of the Troyes *Mémoire* (Troyes, Archives Départementales de l'Aube, MS 10 G 8, fol. 2r).

In the nineteenth century, an archivist, Philippe Guignard, published the manuscripts, but neither had been translated into English. The more I read, the more I understood how unique and important the material really was, especially the set of instructions: these were rare working documents that miraculously had been preserved (while all others from the period had been considered worthless once a project was complete). Both manuscripts were known only to a handful of tapestry scholars, but I became convinced it would be worthwhile to make this information more widely available. That was the genesis of *The Troyes Mémoire: The Making of a Medieval Tapestry*.

Through my work at the Met, and in my private practice, I have discovered a whole world of tapestry extending from pre-history to the present. From the earliest tapestry weavers in the Neolithic period until now, there is a continuous tapestry tradition found in cultures all over the world. Today, in the style and idiom of our time, fine tapestry is still woven in workshops and in the studios of artist weavers.

Because of the range of my experience, from practice as a technician and conservator to scholarly research in the history of tapestry, I find it difficult to think of the one activity as separate from the other. Each has its own perspective and value, but both together are necessary for a full understanding of the art of tapestry. For example, in not knowing anything about the technology of weaving, people will frequently look upon tapestry as if it were a species of painting and thereby miss much of its beauty. Moreover, without understanding the physical condition of a tapestry, such viewers cannot know that what they see may vary drastically from the original. Many tapestries appear dull and monochromatic today because colors, once vibrant and glorious, have faded, damaged by exposure to light and other elements. And without an appreciation for the complexity of the collaborative process of producing tapestry, how can a viewer comprehend the quality of the effort and the many steps that went into creating even a modest tapestry?

Given these concerns, how fortunate I am to have had the opportunity to bring my dual perspectives together in a single publication. I owe considerable thanks to the staff of Boydell & Brewer and to Gale Owen-Crocker and Robin Netherton, the founder-editors of the interdisciplinary journal *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*. *The Troyes Mémoire* is the first in their series on Medieval and Renaissance Clothing and Textiles, which will present a similarly broad view of its subject matter and which is intended for scholars and practitioners alike whose interest is to understand the variety of aspects of the material culture in which textiles and costumes were created and worn centuries ago.

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[http://www.boydellandbrewer.com/medieval\\_herald\\_newsletter.asp](http://www.boydellandbrewer.com/medieval_herald_newsletter.asp)