Four Beauvais Tapestries with Grotesque Motifs

Merit Laine, Curator, Prints and Drawings

Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum
Stockholm

Volume 23

nationalmuseum
**Four Beauvais Tapestries with Grotesque Motifs**

*Merit Laine*

*Curator, Prints and Drawings*

**HIGH-QUALITY TAPESTRIES** were among the most valuable and prestigious art objects of the 17th century, and in this as in many other areas, Louis XIV and his administration led the way. The king acquired sets of the most famous tapestry series of the 16th and 17th centuries, one of the most highly prized of which was *The Triumphs of the Gods*, a series of grotesques designed by Giovanni Da Udine, Giulio Romano and other artists under the supervision of Raphael.¹ It took nine years of active searching to assemble Louis XIV’s set and, on the king’s orders, it was subsequently copied and varied on several occasions. The tapestry designs woven at the Gobelins for use in royal settings also included newly composed grotesques by Noël Coypel and Claude III Audran.

The popularity of grotesques was thus clearly linked to the taste of Louis XIV and the prestige attaching to antiquity and Roman Renaissance art.² It was also reflected in the output of the Beauvais manufactory. Unlike those from the Gobelins, tapestries from Beauvais were not primarily intended for royal settings,

---

*Fig. 1 The Elephant, from Grotesque de Berain, Beauvais, c. 1696–99, after a design by Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer (1636–1699) and Jean Berain I (1640–1711). Wool and silk, 284 x 224 cm. Purchase: Ulla and Gunnar Trygg Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 299A/2016.*
although several purchases were in fact made on the king’s behalf. These included the series *Les Grotesques*, after cartoons created in the late 17th century by Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer, with clear inspiration from Jean Baptiste Monnoyer. They had been ordered by the factory’s director, Philippe Béhagle, and the project was thus a commercial one, rather than a commission from a specific patron. *Les Grotesques* proved to be one of the manufactory’s most successful designs; in different variants, it was woven around 50 times over a period of more than 40 years.² Today, several complete sets and over 150 individual tapestries are known.

Monnoyer’s designs contain numerous references, ranging from antiquity and the Renaissance to contemporary art and theatre, including song and dance performances with an element of parody that also went by the name of *grotesques*.³ Just as the latter were a humorous comment on serious ballets and plays, the designs of Monnoyer can be seen as a playful reformulation of the grotesque tradition found in the court art of Louis XIV. The seemingly disparate motifs can be regarded as elements of a performance that comprised singing, dancing and displays of exotic animals, all under the patronage of Bacchus and Pan – the two gods who appear among the subjects of the series. The same playfulness is also visible in the actual composition and reminds us that the grotesques of the late 17th century would soon be further developed in the interior decoration of the French Rococo.

Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer’s designs comprised six subjects, referred to by modern scholars as *The Offering to Pan*, *The Offering to Bacchus*, *Musicians and Dancers*, *The Animal Tamers*, *The Elephant* and *The Camel*. The compositions could be adapted to different requirements, however, in terms of both size and constituent elements. Preserved examples show that there were many variations, as can be seen in the four comparatively small grotesque tapestries

---

Fig. 2 *The Offering to Bacchus*, from *Grotesque de Berain*, Beauvais, c. 1696–99, after a design by Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer (1636–1699) and Jean Berain I (1640–1711). Wool and silk, 279 x 262 cm. Purchase: Ulla and Gunnar Trygg Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 299B/2016.
from Beauvais recently acquired by the Nationalmuseum. One of them shows the central motif of *The Elephant*, another, featuring a peacock and a flower-filled vase, the central panel of certain versions of *The Camel*. Both these subjects have been adapted to make the central section a complete, self-contained composition. In the other two, *The Offering to Pan* and *The Offering to Bacchus*, on the other hand, the border clearly cuts off parts of the original composition.

Monnoyer has been identified as the designer of the series from correspondence between Daniel Cronström and Nicodemus Tessin the Younger, in which the artist is mentioned in connection with an order placed by the Swedish count Carl Piper, who wanted a couple of sets of tapestries for one of his houses in Stockholm. Cronström suggested the Beauvais series *Ports de Mer* (Piper’s set is preserved in a private collection) and *Les Grotesques* as the most suitable. Piper took his advice and was delighted with the tapestries when they arrived towards the end of 1699. They were also much admired by Tessin and others. Yet another set of *Les Grotesques*, it too of fairly modest dimensions, was commissioned by the Bielke family and now adorns the wedding room at Stockholm City Hall.

Piper wanted tapestries that were appreciably smaller than the standard sizes. The small proportions and the design of the borders – ornaments in the style of Berain in red against a blue ground, described in detail in one of Cronström’s letters – suggest that the Nationalmuseum’s new acquisitions in fact represent four of Piper’s tapestries. The provenance of the set can be traced to the Danish collector George Jorck (1865–1955); at the time, it reportedly comprised seven tapestries and a fragment; of these, one is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and another in the Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid. The grotesque tapestries will be displayed in a central position in the newly

---

Fig. 3 *Peacock*, from *Grotesque de Berain*, Beauvais, c. 1696–99, after a design by Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer (1636–1699) and Jean Berain I (1640–1711). Wool and silk, 282 x 236 cm. Purchase: Ulla and Gunnar Trygg Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 299C/2016.
opened Nationalmuseum, along with other works that recall the close artistic ties between France and Sweden in the decades around the turn of the 18th century. The tapestries also make a worthy memorial to Gunnar and Ulla Trygg, whose bequest to the Museum made possible this important and internationally noted acquisition.

Notes:
4. See Bremer-David 2015.

Figs. 4 The Offering to Pan, from Grotesque de Berain, Beauvais, c. 1696–99, after a design by Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer (1636–1699) and Jean Berain I (1640–1711). Wool and silk, 279 x 257 cm. Purchase: Ulla and Gunnar Trygg Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 299D/2016.