

For centuries the best way to decorate and insulate a room in a draughty country house was to line the walls with tapestries. Flemish tapestries had been renowned since the Medieval era, but at the beginning of the 17th century King Henri IV started a programme to develop the manufactories of France, to develop his country's skills and economy and to reduce the expenditure of his court abroad.

He established the tapestry workshops at the Gobelin dye works at Faubourg Saint-Marcel, already famous for cochineal red. In 1662 the site was purchased for the Crown and artists, goldsmiths and cabinet makers' workshops were also established to make commissions for the royal houses and diplomatic gifts. Over the next 30 years under the direction of artist Charles Le Brun, Gobelins tapestry makers enjoyed a golden era completing over 775 tapestries depicting scenes of biblical or classical tales as well as the significant events in the life of Louis XIV.

Genuine Gobelin tapestry is smooth, without any nap, made with needles or small

shuttles, its fine quality allows for the thread on the reverse to only extend to the same width as it does on the front, so that the underside of the tapestry is the same as the right side, only in reverse rather than in a nest of threads extending the whole width from selvedge to selvedge.

Gobelins tapestry is woven from the reverse so the weaver works at the back of the tapestry, only parting the threads periodically to check progress on the face of the tapestry in a mirror set up behind. In *Diary of a European Tour*, 1900, Margaret Addison describes tapestry makers at work at the Gobelin Tapestry Manufactory: "Only a few inches of tapestry can be made per day. All is made by hand and is a copy of some famous picture. The picture is placed behind the weaver, and a glass reflects the colours on the threads suspended to the ceiling." Gobelins tapestries were coveted status symbols found in royal palaces and the finest houses across the world, but few could afford them. ♦♦♦ SJD

FABRIC SWATCH

No 22: Gobelins Tapestry

