The Fruits and Nuts of the Unicorn Tapestries

Jules Janick and Anna Whipkey

The unicorn is a mythical beast with the body of a milk-white small horse with single spiraling horn arising from his forehead but with cloven hooves and chin whiskers like a male goat. The horn, resembling that of a narwhale, presumably had curative powers that allowed the unicorn to detoxify water. The unicorn became a popular subject in medieval art and is treated with both religious and erotic overtones. The fierce unicorn became both a symbol of the resurrected Christ and a courtly symbol of purity, grace, and love. The animal was fierce and elusive and could only be captured by a virgin who tamed the beast in her lap. Thus, the unicorn became a popular artistic subject in literature, paintings, and tapestries.

There are two famous extant tapestries involving the unicorn: The Lady and the Unicorn (6 tapestries) dating to the 1480s (Fig. 1) and now located in the Musée de Cluny in Paris, an allegory of the six senses; and The Hunt of the Unicorn (Fig. 2 and front cover) made between 1490 and 1505 (7 tapestries, one in two fragments) located in the Cloisters in Upper Manhattan, a branch of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Lady and the Unicorn series is formal, serene, and static, while the Hunt of the Unicorn is naturalistic, dynamic, and spirited. Both are overwhelmingly beautiful and represent the high point of the tapestry art form. The tapestries have been discussed in a number of works by art historians including Margaret B. Freeman (1976) and Adolfo Salvatore Cavallo (1998). Both tapestries incorporate a style popular in French and Flemish tapestry known as mille-fleur (thousand flowers) where a mass of flowering herbs and trees are included in the background giving the tapestries high horticultural interest. The plants in the Hunt series have been identified based on symbols by Eleanor C. Marquand (1938) and on botanical evidence by E.J. Alexander and Carol H. Woodward (1941). In this paper the fruit crops of the tapestry are reviewed and treated from a horticultural perspective.

The Tapestries

The Lady and the Unicorn. This series of six tapestries is considered to be allegory of the six senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, and desire) consist of an exquisitely gowned lady and her handmaiden between a lion and a unicorn on an oval carpet of flowers in the mille-fleur style. The figures are serene and posed. The lion continually hoists a flag of three half-moons (the banner of the Le Viste family for whom the tapestry was created) as does the unicorn in four of the tapestries. In Tapestry 1, the unicorn kneels with his front legs on the lap of the lady. Each background includes a copse of trees among which are oak, holly, lemon, and stone pine.

The Hunt of the Unicorn. This series of seven tapestries can be best described by their current titles: (1) The start of the hunt, (2) The unicorn dips his horn into the stream to rid it of poison, (3) The unicorn leaps the stream, (4) The unicorn defends himself, (5) The unicorn is tamed by the maiden, two fragments, (6) The unicorn is killed and brought to the castle, and (7) The unicorn in captivity. All contain numerous signature initials (A and reverse E) connected by a cord in a bowknot indicating the tapestries were prepared for a single patron, possibly to celebrate the marriage of Anne of Brittany and King Louis XII on January 8, 1499 (Rorimer, 1942). All the tapestries were not designed by the same artist.
Tapestries 2 through 6 appear to be based on a paintings of a single artist and are filled with hunters and their dogs, animals, and plants, all in a natural setting, and include as unifying element — a glimpse of a castle, a stream, and the unicorn. The mass of figures and dogs are dramatically involved in the hunt and the final killing of the unicorn in Tapestry 6 is almost too horrifyingly graphic. In the same tapestry the corpse of the unicorn on the back of a horse is transported to a noble couple and their retinue who stand in front of their castle. Tapestries 1 and 7 appear to be an afterthought and the initials A and Ǝ are similar to each other but thinner than those of 2 to 6. Both tapestries are in the style of mille-fleur with the background consisting of a carpet of flowers. Tapestry 1 does not include the unicorn and the portraits of the hunters are stiff and cruder than those in 2 to 6. Tapestry 7, contains only the unicorn, now alive, with an ornamental collar and leash enclosed in a small round corral with a single fantasy tree carrying fruits of pomegranate which stain the unicorn’s body with their juice. This last tapestry has been considered the most beautiful and is the best known of the series.

**Fruit and Nut Crops**

Seventeen traditional fruits and nuts will be discussed and examples will be illustrated from both tapestries as follows: small fruits (strawberry and blackberry); stone fruits (cherry, peach, plums, apricot); pome fruits (medlar, and hawthorn); nuts (hazel nut, oak, stone pine, and walnut), subtropical and tropical fruits (lemon, sour orange, pomegranate, and date palm), and ornamental (holly). Identification of species in the Hunt Tapestry with some exceptions agree with those of Alexander and Woodward (1941) who also provisionally identified some forest trees (arbutus, aspen, beech linden, and elm) based on flower and tree form but these but these will not be considered here. In addition, images of each fruit will be included from a contemporary work, the *Grandes Heures d’Anne de Bretagne* (*Grandes Heures*) illustrated by Jean Bourdichon between 1503 and 1508 ([http://mandragore.bnf.fr/jsp/rechercheExperte.jsp](http://mandragore.bnf.fr/jsp/rechercheExperte.jsp)). These plants (237 images) have been identified in an index of *Promenade dans des Jardins Diparus* (Bilimoff, 2001 p. 138–139).

**Strawberry.** There are numerous images of the diploid (2n=14) wood strawberry or Frais des bois (*Fragaria vesca*), in the mille-fleur background of two tapestries of the Hunt series: Tapestry 1 (6 plants) and Tapestry 7 (7 plants). The images are very naturalistic (Fig. 3) showing trifoliate serrated leaves, tall branched inflorescences bearing 5-petaled white flowers, and small red fruits, some showing prominent achenes. The image is similar to that found in the *Grandes Heures*.

**Blackberry.** A single image of blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus*) in flower is found in Tapestry 6 of the Hunt Tapestry (Fig. 4) showing a plant climbing on a hazelnut (filbert) tree (see below). The trifoliate palmately, compound leaves are serrate and accurately portrayed; the stem is thorny. The flowers show 5 petals; fruits are not shown. A blackberry is found in *Grandes Heures* with fruit and flowers.

**Cherry.** Four images of the sweet cherry (*Prunus avium*) are found in the Hunt Tapestries. It is the dominant tree in Tapestry 1 (Fig. 5A), and there are smaller bush like forms within Tapestry 2 (Fig. 5B), 3, and 4. It is unclear if they are bicolored or merely tinged with white to represent highlighting. Solid red fruit is found in *Grandes Heures*. 
Plum. Three images have been identified as plums (*Prunus domestica*) in the Hunt Tapestry. These include a small tree with light blue fruit in Tapestry 1 (Fig. 6A) and trees in Tapestry 2 (Fig. 6B) and 3 with dark purple fruit, perhaps *Prunus insititia* know as Mirabelle of France or bullace in Britain. Fig 6C from the *Grandes Heures* has been identified as a *Prunus domestica*, (Prunier de Damas or damascus plum).

Peach. A single image of a peach tree is located in the right corner of Hunt Tapestry 4 (Fig. 7A). The tree contains 12 yellowish globular fruits, each showing a prominent suture, with a bowknot attached to the A reverse E initials looped around one branch. The leaves are lanceolate, typical of peach. Fruit size based on leaf length of 12–15 cm long suggest the peaches are about 6–8cm in diameter. The trunk of the tree is suggestive of rough bark. Fig 7B shows a stem bearing peach fruit from the *Grandes Heures*. Peaches were reported in France as early as 530 and included in Charlemagne’s *Capitulare de Villis* in 800.

Apricot. One small tree (Fig. 8A) with orange-red fruit in the upper right corner of the Hunt Tapestry 4 has been identified as apricot (*Prunus armeniaca*). Leaves are more round than lanceolate as is typical for this species. Fig 8B shows a stem bearing yellow-orange apricot fruit from the *Grandes Heures*.

Medlar. The medlar (*Mespilus germanica*) is now considered a very minor fruit but was quite popular in medieval Europe. Medlar images are found in four of the Hunt tapestries. Three small trees are found in Tapestry 2, 3 (Fig. 9A) and 4 with small fruit showing a closed calyx. In the fragment of Tapestry 5 is a portion of a large tree with 5 large reddish-brown fruit (Fig. 9B) that was classified as apple by Alexander and Woodward but a close inspection of the fruit indicates that it must be medlar with a very wide calyx as shown in the inset from a photograph. Fig. 9C shows medlar fruits from *Grandes Heures*, very close to Fig 9A.

Hawthorn. Hawthorn trees with small white flowers have been identified in Tapestry 3 (Fig 10A) and 6 of the Hunt Tapestry. They were identified as *Crataegus oxycanthus* by Alexander and Woodward but the common hawthorn of Europe (*C. monogyna*) is also known commonly as mayblossom, maythorn, and haw. The spiny shrub is commonly planted as a hedge plant and the berries have some medicinal uses. Fig. 10B shows a fruiting stem from *Grandes Heures*.

Hazelnut. Hazelnut trees (*Corylus avellana*) are found in the Hunt Tapestry 3 and 6. Tapestry 3 contains a small tree with many nuts, and Tapestry 6 includes a very large tree with a fat, brown squirrel feasting on the nuts (Fig. 11A). The blackberry bush described above is found at the bottom of this tree. The nuts show the husk covering the seeds and were known as filberts in England. Similar fruits (Fig. 11B) are shown in the *Grandes Heures*.

Stone Pine. There are five trees in the Lady Tapestry (2 to 6) with drooping needle-like leaves surrounding a pine cone that must be *Pinus pinea* also known *pin pignon* or *pin parasol* in French and Mediterranean stone pine in English (Fig. 12A). The tree has been cultivated for thousands of years in Europe. An image of stone pine can be found in the *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 12B). Stone pine is not included in the Hunt Tapestries.
Walnut. There are two images of walnut in the Hunt Tapestry, one in Tapestry 1 (shoots only) (Fig. 13A) and the other in Tapestry 4 (shoots plus brown fruit) (Fig. 13B). The leaves are alternate pinnate with up to 10 leaflets plus a terminal one. The species is clearly *Juglans regia* known both as the Persian or English walnut. Fruiting shoots are shown in *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 13C). Walnut trees were common in France and used for timber, as an edible nut, for oil, and the shells provided a hair dye.

Oak. Oak is the most common tree found in the tapestries. In the Lady Tapestries, oak trees with prominent acorns on long pedicels (Fig 14A) characteristic of *Quercus robur* (French or English oak), are found in each of the six tapestries. In the Hunt series, oaks are found in all the tapestries except 7 (Fig. 14B). In Tapestry 1 leaves are shown with galls as a result of insect attack. Fruiting shoots of oak are shown in the *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 14C).

Citrus: Lemon and Sour Orange. Citrus trees are found both in the Lady Tapestries (2 to 6) and in the Hunt Tapestries (2 and 4). In all cases, fruit and leaves are shown together, a common characteristic of *Citrus*. In the Lady Tapestry 4 (Fig. 15A) the fruit is very light yellow and leaves are alternately arranged on a shoot with no evidence of winged pedicels. The tree is probably lemon (*Citrus limon*) where some types do not have winged pedicels. In the Hunt series citrus trees are found in Tapestry 2 (Fig 15B) and 4 (Fig 15B). The fruits are a darker orange, somewhat flat with what appears to be bumpy loosely adherent peel. There is evidence of winged petioles characteristic of sour orange. Since sweet orange was introduced into Europe in the mid 16th century by the Portuguese (Castel-Branco and Rojo, 2009) it cannot be sweet orange (*Citrus sinensis*) as identified by Alexander and Woodward but is likely to be bitter or sour orange (*Citrus aurantium*). In *Grandes Heures* the tree is thorny and the winged pedicles are clearly shown (Fig. 15D).

Pomegranate. There are two images of pomegranate (*Punica granatum*) in the Hunt Tapestry. In Tapestry 3 (Fig. 16A) there is a small tree that is obviously a pomegranate based on the young fruit shape. In Tapestry 7 (Fig. 16B) a large fantasy tree dominates the scene of the unicorn in captivity which is clearly a figment of the artist’s imagination but some of the fruits are split showing the seeds, clearly indicating they are pomegranates. In addition, the red juice of the pomegranate appears on the Unicorn body (Fig. 1, Tapestry 7). The fantasy tree has been explained by the fact that the pomegranate was unknown in France in the medieval period but this is belied by the fruit in Tapestry 1 and the painting in the *Grandes Heures* (Fig 16C). The discrepancy provides additional evidence that the artist of Tapestry 7 was different from Tapestry 2 to 6.

Date Palm. In Hunt Tapestry 1 there are two images of young date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*) one of which is shown in Fig. 17. Although palms could not be grown to maturity young palms could have been grown from seed and maintained in orangeries. Dates were imported to medieval France from North Africa. There are no date palms in the Lady Tapestry or in *Grandes Heures*.

Holly. There are images of European holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) with red berries in all six of the Lady tapestries (Fig. 18A) and in the Hunt tapestries 2 to 6 (Fig 18B), as well as *Grandes Heures* (Fig. 18C). Fruit are considered toxic but are an important food source for birds.

The Unicorn Tapestries and Horticulture
Although the origin and provenance of the unicorn tapestries are obscure, they continually fascinate. They represent an extraordinary team accomplishment of the designer, the artist, and the tapestry workshop. They illustrate the complex life of the nobility pursuing their life of pleasure and passion. The tapestries reflect the complex activity of the ruling medieval class, overlaid with images of legend, and nature that combine to bring to us a visual testimony of the period — richer and more complex that mere words on a page.

Art historians considered these works the high point of the art of tapestry. They are extremely complex — artistically and symbolically. The interpretation of their meaning is open to wide speculation. Their allure is due to the complex issues that they depict including the life of aristocratic women, the details of a bloody hunt of a mythical beast, and courtly dress and costume, all overlaid with both religious and erotic symbolism. The extraordinary views of nature and the landscape incorporate a wide array of fauna including hunting dogs, birds, wild animals and the mythological unicorn, and diverse flora, both cultivated and wild. They are a horticultural wonder with hundreds of images — over 100 different species of herbaceous and woody plants. Clearly the diversity of garden plants was a prominent source of appeal for late medieval artists. The presence of 17 fruit and nut plants (apricot, blackberry, cherry, date palm, lemon, hawthorn, hazelnut, holly, medlar, oak, peach, plum, pomegranate, sour orange, stone pine, strawberry, walnut) and almost a hundred ornamental herbaceous plants leave no doubt as to the prominence and appeal of horticulture.

Yet, despite the wide array of fruits and nuts common to the period, many well known ones are absent including apple, chestnut, currents, fig, grape, olive, pear, and quince. The diversity of fruit and nut crops in the Unicorn tapestries is not as extensive as found in a contemporary work, the ceiling of the Villa Farnesina known as the Loggia of Cupid and Psyche in Rome where a wider array of plants is found in festoons painted in 1517 by Giovanna da Udina, an assistant of Raphael Sanzio who painted the figures (Janick, 2012). The difference can be easily explained. In the Farnesina loggia, an intent was made to present a wide diversity of plants to glorify the scientific presumptions of Agostino Chigi for whom the decorations were created and who grew many of these plants in his garden called a vividiarium. The relationship of the aristocracy and gardens was also illustrated in late 15th century manuscripts from Northern Italy known as the Tacuinum Sanitatis which shows nobles engaged in supervision, sport, and romance and feudal laborers involved in toil revolving about vegetables, fruits, culinary herbs, and flowers, with an emphasis on health (Daunay et al. 2009). It is also intriguing that Anne of Brittany (1457–1521), twice Queen of France, whose marriage to Louis XII in 1499 is considered to be the source of the Unicorn tapestries (Rorimer, 1942) had a passion for horticulture. A prayer book illustrated by Jean Bourdichon, official court painter, made for her between 1503 and 1508 contains about 340 fantastic naturalistic paintings of plants with insects (Bilimoff, 2001; Paris et al., 2006). Clearly, Anne of Brittany, was enamored of plants. It includes practically all the fruits and nuts found in the two tapestries (the only exception is date palm). In the Unicorn Tapestries the exuberant display of plants clearly serves a decorative function reflecting the appeal of garden imagery to the artist and of the sponsors.

Religious symbolism has been considered to play an important role in the plants chosen for the tapestries (Marquand, 1938; Rorimer, 1942, Freeman, 1976; Cavallo, 1998) but the extent is open to
question since there are a hundred species of plants found, most of them in the mille-fleur pattern. The tapestry emphasis on hunting, horticultural plants, gardens, music, dress, and pageantry extol class, privilege, and power. Gardens and gardening, especially fruit and nut plants and ornamentals as compared to vegetables was a consistent theme of the upper classes and an important pastime of the aristocracy. No vegetable plants are found in the tapestries. The tapestries, extremely expensive to make, were a status symbol of the nobility and any religiosity of the tapestries are clearly not the major focus. These tapestries differ from religious narratives in tone and texture. Since all plants were endowed with symbolic associations it is easy to construct a religious narrative that may be more apparent than real. Rather the key point of the tapestries represent a means to glorify the life and pastimes of the nobility, which are at deep variance with the suffering and stress found in works sponsored by the Church. The hunt is an extension of the masculine admiration for war and glory, an activity unavailable to the peasant class, and the bloodlust in hunt is an extension of the power or the ruling classes. Horticulture here represents the feminine attributes of beauty, refinement, and wealth that separated the aristocracy from the peasantry.

Acknowledgment

I thank David Karp and Eliezer Goldschmidt for assistance in plant identification.

Literature Cited


Manuscripts

Grandes Heures d’Anne de Bretagne, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Mandragore, base des manuscrits enluminés de la BnF. Latin 9474. Artist: Jean Bourdichon

http://mandragore.bnf.fr/jsp/rechercheExperte.jsp
Fig. 1. The six tapestries of *The Lady and the Unicorn*: (1) Sight, (2) Hearing, (3) Taste, (4) Smell, (5) Touch, (6) Desire.
Fig. 2. The seven tapestries of *The Hunt of the Unicorn*: (1) The start of the hunt; (2) The unicorn dips his horn into the stream to rid it of poison; (3) The unicorn leaps the stream; (4) The unicorn defends himself; (5) The unicorn is tamed by the maiden, two fragments; (6) The unicorn is killed and brought to the castle; and (7) The unicorn in captivity (see Cover).
Fig. 3. Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*): (A) Hunt Tapestry 67; (B) *Grandes Heures*.

Fig. 4. Blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus*): (A) Hunt Tapestry 5; (B) *Grandes Heures*.

Fig. 5. Cherry (*Prunus avium*): (A) tree in Hunt Tapestry 1; (B) shrub in Hunt Tapestry 2; (C) fruiting stem in *Grandes Heures*.

Fig. 6. Plums (*Prunus* spp.): (A) blue plum (*P. domestica*) in Hunt Tapestry 1; (B) purple plum (*P. insititia*) in Hunt Tapestry 2; (C) *Grandes Heures*. 
Fig. 7. Peach (*Prunus persica*): (A) tree in Hunt Tapestry 4; (B) fruiting stem in *Grandes Heures*.

Fig. 8. Apricot (*Prunus armeniaca*): (A) tree in Hunt Tapestry 4; (B) fruiting stem *Grandes Heures*.

Fig. 9. Medlar (*Mespilus germanica*): (A) tree and fruit in Hunt Tapestry 3; (B) tree and fruit in Hunt Tapestry 5, right fragment, inset is photograph of fruit with open calyx; (C) fruiting stem in *Grandes Heures*. 
Fig. 10. Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*): (A) trees in Hunt Tapestry 3; (B) fruiting stem in *Grandes Heures*.

Fig. 11. Hazelnut (*Corylus avelena*): (A) tree with squirrel eating nuts; (B) fruiting stem in *Grandes Heures*.

Fig. 12. Stone pine (*Pinus picea*): (A) one of five tree in the Lady Tapestry; (B) stem with needles and cones in *Grandes Heures*.
Fig. 13. Walnut (*Juglans regia*): (A) non-fruiting branches in Hunt Tapestry 1; (B) fruiting tree in Hunt Tapestry 4; (C) fruiting stem in *Grandes Heures*.

Fig. 14. Oak (*Quercus rubra*): (A) fruiting tree with acorns on long pedicels in Lady Tapestry 4; (B) in a non-fruiting tree in Tapestry 1 of the Hunt series leaf galls are present on the leaves; (C) fruiting stem in *Grandes Heures*.
Fig. 15. Citrus: (A) lemon (*Citrus limon*) in Lady Tapestry 5, one of five trees in the series, all without winged pedicels; (B) sour orange (*Citrus aurantium*) in Hunt Tapestry 2; (C) Hunt Tapestry 4; and (D) *Grandes Heures*. Winged pedicles are circled.

Fig. 16. Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*): (A) Hunt Tapestry 3; (B) fantasy tree in Hunt Tapestry 7; (C) *Grandes Heures*. 
Fig. 17. Date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) from Hunt Tapestry 1.

Fig. 18. Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*): (A) Lady Tapestry 5; (B) Hunt Tapestry 3; (C) *Grandes Heures*. 