



# Learning From Tapestries



# Learning from Tapestries



# Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>The New Yorker Article</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>The Tapestry Bookshelf</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>The Tapestries on Google</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>The Tapestries Room</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>The Tapestries as a Plant Catalogue</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>53</i>



*"You can hang a picture, but you can not hang an image. The picture is a material object, a thing you can burn or break or tear. An image is what appears in a picture, and what survives its destruction—in memory, in narrative, in copies and traces in other media."*<sup>1</sup>

W.J.T Mitchell



# Introduction

This is the story of how I met a series of artworks, medieval masterpieces, known as the *Unicorn tapestries: The Lady and the Unicorn* in Musée de Cluny in Paris and *The Hunt of the Unicorn* from the Metropolitan Museum of art in New York.

My first encounter with these tapestries was through an online article from the New Yorker, *Capturing the Unicorn*, which tells the story of the conservation of the *Unicorn tapesries* of the Metropolitan Museum of art of New York. The contrast between reading the story of conservation, going to a library, seeing pictures on the screen, and the encounter in real life, made me think of how we perceive with our body in contrast to our new digital ways of looking.

I will take you on a tour through to the public library of Amsterdam, Google Image search and the Musée de Cluny in Paris that shows my observations on the different ways we see in digital and physical places. I will present my experiences in a narrative that, mixes real observations with imagination. 🌿





# 1

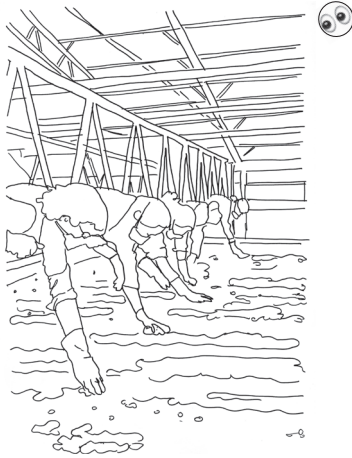
## The New Yorker Article

Reading an article about the conservation laboratory of the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York.

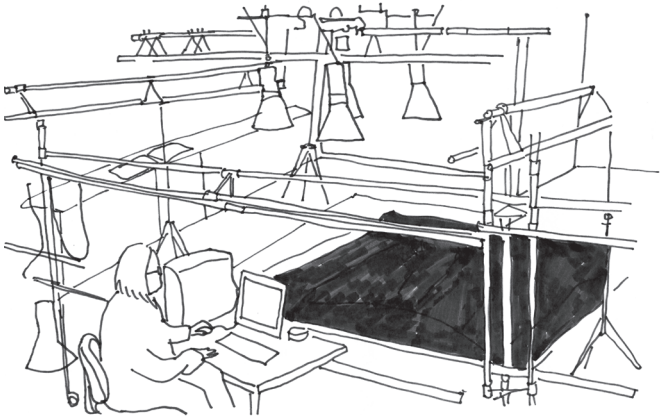
“High Tech” conservators that could not record a picture.

The New Yorker article; “*Capturing The Unicorn, How Two Mathematicians Came To The Aid Of The MET<sup>3</sup>*”, made me realise that a tapestry is a three-dimensional structure and a picture at the same time. The article tells the story of the restoration of one of the tapestries, *The Unicorn in Captivity*, from *The Hunt of the Unicorn*, colloquially known as the *Unicorn Tapestries*, owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York. As part of its restoration, the tapestry was recorded digitally by making detailed pictures of every inch and assembling these afterwards.

The structure of the tapestry is fragile and the restoration was going to be a very delicate process. The size and weight of the object make restoration even more complicated. The process starts with cleaning dust from the fibers to get the original colors back. To do this, the tapestry was taken to the lab and put in a giant bath 🧐 The conservator Kathrin Colburn noted about this process: “Intellectually, I knew the colours wouldn’t bleed, but the anxiety of seeing a Unicorn tapestry underwater is something I’ll never forget.” When Peter Barnet, the curator in charge of the medieval art section at the MET, looked at the image through the water, he noticed “seemed to be liquefied and smelled like an old sweater”. When they tried to assemble the digital pictures that were taken of the tapestry another problem occurred: “They found that the files were too large and too complex to manage.



*Washing of a tapestry.*



*Recording of a Taperstry*

When they tried to fit the puzzle pieces together, however, they wouldn't join properly—the warp and weft threads didn't run smoothly from one tile to the next [...] Sutures were visible. The result was a sort of Frankenstein version of the Unicorn tapestries." They encountered the three-dimensional character of the tapestry. Because the tapestries had been hanging vertically for centuries, when placed on the floor, the warp threads relaxed: "The tapestries began to breathe, expanding, contracting, shifting. It was as if the tapestries had woken up. The threads twisted and rotated restlessly." The rest of the article describes how they then hired two mathematicians to build a special program that could do the image correction, It may wonder how the staff of the conservation laboratory could neglect the mechanical properties of threads, relying on only 2D image technology as a way to represent, and therefore understand, the object. To be able to do the image correction, the mathematicians used a highly precise technology able to record visual information measuring only 50 microns, half the thickness of a hair. This incredible preciseness then is how it became possible to record the small imperceptible changes of the material.

An image shot with such accuracy could be done only patch by patch. Several pictures had to be made measuring only a few inches. Each picture contained so many pixels that a system with a powerful memory was necessary to cope with all the information. This was further complicated by the fact

that each image required correction in order to link them together with the perfect sutures; each wire, cut by the limits of the frame of the picture had to be connected digitally with its neighboring picture.

Reading about the process of digitally recording the tapestry and assembling the digital tiles, I saw a link to the time-consuming craft of weaving itself. In a way, the conservators and computer scientists also had to “make” a picture as the weavers did with their hands and needles. Medieval tapestries were weaved piece by piece and some patterns would be repeated in different places of the tapestry. The repetition of patterns made me think of the way we create images today, on the computer. This action of selection and duplication was, before the invention of printing by Gutenberg, a first step towards the reproducibility of images<sup>4</sup>. The flexibility of the surface of the tapestry makes it almost a soft image. Each strand of wool is like a pixel that can be subtracted, added or duplicated. The image is ‘mounted’ little by little with threads. The threads are knotted on the weft like on a grid. The image can be modified by removing the thread out of the weave. That observation made me think of a thread as removable visual information, a bit like a physical materialization of a pixel.<sup>5</sup>

The New Yorker story of the conservation of the Unicorn Tapestries was written 13 years ago when digital photography was still the most used technique to make a visual record in textile con-

ervation.<sup>6</sup> It seemed to me that the conservators, mesmerized by their own cameras and computers, could not see the tapestry anymore. What was more important to them, the tools they were using, the obsession of the detail or the tapestry? Ironically, by wanting to make a brighter and highly precise picture, they failed in recording it. I thought about their desire to capture a picture, their obsession with precision that turned out to be counterproductive. 🍀

# 2

## The Tapestry Bookshelf

Going to the Public Library of Amsterdam, OBA and observing the tapestry bookshelf. Librarians and the measuring tape.



As I wanted to get more knowledge about tapestries, I went to the public library of Amsterdam, the OBA, knowing more or less that I would find what I was looking for. The tapestry section includes books with a focus on the medieval and baroque period, such as *"The Bayeux tapestry: The Complete Tapestry"* or *"Tapestry in the Baroque: new aspects of production and patronage"*<sup>8</sup>. It also includes books about the renewal of the craft from the 1950s to the late 1970s, where tapestry is renamed "fiber art" or "mural art." Books about "old" tapestries that fill these shelves seem to be written mostly in the late 1980s. (I mean 'Old' covering a time that goes from antiquity until the 18 century, the age of early mechanization).

The books are quite similar in format, bigger than a laptop-sized bag, heavy, with a more or less plain photograph on the cover. They mostly show a succession of the most famous pieces with a description about the origin of the object, following a chronological order with a focus on the acquisition, the restoration steps or the iconology. It seems that the focus on the meaning of the representation frames tapestries as a fine art object and the focus on restoration frames the objects as archeological artifacts.



The most common information about tapestries I found in these books<sup>9</sup>, goes as follows:

*TAPESTRIES are man-made artifacts that belong to highly crafted interior decoration. They are a sort of paintings made of threads of silk and wool depicting narratives inspired both by real and imaginary events: battles, the lives of saints and scenes from daily life.*

*Creating a TAPESTRY is a time consuming, that takes several years to be completed. An artist starts by painting a small image, called a cartoon, just like the name used for children animation movies. This will be reproduced and enlarged on a piece of paper that is the exact size of the final tapestry. A team of 5 weavers would sit side by side and work only during daylight as candle light would modify the appearance of the colors. They worked facing the back of the tapestry, the resulting image would be inverted.*

*TAPESTRIES are precise. Flemish weavers developed the ability to reproduce an extraordinary range of surface textures and painterly effects through the use of finer and finer interlocking triangles of colour called hatchings. The weaver used the same cartoon and placed it in different areas of the tapestry. For example, the flower patterns were made, one by one, by placing small squares contiguous to each other.*

TAPESTRIES are designed to insulate and decorate the inside walls of architecture and their size can vary from one to six meters high, forming rectangles or squares.

TAPESTRIES tell stories with several temporalities and actions on the same piece or under the form of series, each of them telling a different chapter. Characters appear in frozen attitudes performing actions belonging to the medieval era such as fightings, hunting and harvesting. The background of a tapestry is mostly moss green or brownish colours representing a forest or abstract fields of leaves, they seem to be screens for the interiors, showing what is happening outside.

TAPESTRIES are luxury home products. At the end of the middle ages, they were the most expensive artwork one could possess. Because of their symbolic status, in later times they would be imitated, reproduced in a cheaper version and installed as curtains to make modest habitations feel bigger, dividing a big room into separate spaces.

TAPESTRIES can be evaluated on their fineness. That quality depends on the nature of the materials, the skill of the weavers to translate the design into a woven form. The thickness of the threads and the tightness of the weave (the number of warps per centimeters and the grade of the weft) directly affected the detail and pictorial quality of the tapestry.

As my eyes were going through the texts, I could recognize the repeated information present in different sources. It made me question about how we believe in cross-referencing sources, thus convincing ourselves that repeated information forms a kind of truth. My way of selecting the information I've shared here about tapestries was based on just this sort of repetition. I thought I was thinking, deducing with my brain, but maybe it is just a reflex of my eyes? Can seeing the same information multiples times in different contexts become an indicator for validity or is it just that this frequency of seeing creates an impression that prints onto my mind?

I observed the shelf about tapestries: the books have diverse colours and shapes but they are all protected with plastic and tagged with a letter and number that creates a unity as if they are dressed in the same uniform. I noticed that the visual impression I had when seeing the diverse book-covers, influenced the way I evaluated the quality of the knowledge I was looking for. I became aware that the visual style of book-covers has a huge influence on how we think, we select different sources. That we believe that having different perspectives on the same theme gives us a more well rounded knowledge.

Does that visual diversity reflect a diversity of points of view? It made me question how the books were selected. Are the books diverse in appearance because the decision of selecting came

from different sources that changed over time, piling up together different decisions or is it the same source that decided to select different kind of books? This made me question, more generally: how is what we see influencing the way we think?

As I was walking in the art section, between the bookshelves, I thought: it's nice that the order is stable and doesn't change over time. Even without opening the books, you can feel the knowledge is there. The bookshelves are similar and respect a certain spacing, allowing the visitor to circulate easily. The topic of "tapestry" was at the end of the art section, next to other crafts, behind fashion, at the bottom shelves next to wallpaper and curtains. In other libraries I visited, it was also at the end of the art section, sometimes paired with knitting and gardening, but never with architecture or film as I have seen so far. Making my way to the tapestry section, I observed how the physical location of the shelf impacts the way we consider the topic. The plan of a library is divided into parts and each topic gets a certain amount of space.

The bookshelves are full and I guess that when they have to renew books, they have to throw away irrelevant documents. I had the feeling that the tapestry books were next on the list because they looked quite outdated.

I wondered how much space do we give to different kind of knowledge and thought that the physical presence of a topic doesn't always reflect the way we hierarchize these topics. For example I observed that more space is allocated to children's books than philosophy books even though it is considered a higher category of knowledge.



*Public Library of Amsterdam.  
Tapestry bookshelf.*



*Public library of Amsterdam.  
Employee with measuring tape.*

A few weeks after this visit, I decided to come back to ask the librarians about how the library works. I went to the fourth floor, for arts but could not find the tapestry section anymore...and I saw an employee with a meter in hand measuring a shelf.

To the employee:

Hi, can I ask you a question? Are you measuring the space that the book takes on a shelf?

Yes.

Is there a specific amount of centimeter by topic?

Employee - Not like that but we are now changing the location of the books so if the new shelf is smaller, then we have to get rid of books, hey, you should ask the one who is responsible, she just walked by.



*Other employe with tapeline.*

He introduced me to Elly Dehler, responsible for the media. She had a tapeline in her hands.

Hi, I am a student from the Rietveld academy and I would like to ask you a few questions about the placement of the books.

Alright, but how does it relates to arts?

I made a research about a medieval tapestry and I found the way you organized the bookshelf very interesting. So I was curious on how you categorize different topics in relation to the space of the library.

Ok, let's go to the tapestry section

I walked with her to the new tapestry section. Before it was on the right side of the fourth floor, now it's on the left side, next to the elevator.



So this is the new place for tapestry? When I visited the library a month ago, it thought the order would be stable but i see that you changed the position of the shelf.

Yes, we did it three weeks ago.

Did you you get rid of some books in the tapestry section?

(too many books to remember)

How did you take this decision?

It's a software that decides, we have it in a computer on wheels, before we had barcodes but now we have this tag inside that the computer can read, it's called Radio Frequency Identity, RFID. It also prevents books from being stolen.

She shows a tag inside the book, a sticker that has the size of a credit card.

So you don't have to open the book?

No we read the id by passing a tool in front of the book. We bought that device twelve years ago and it's already old fashioned... but it still works. There is an antenna that reads ten centimeters around. Only the metal of the shelf is a barrier, if it was wood there it's no problem. Also if labels are at the same place it's a problem, so we move the books a bit inside the shelf. (She pushes the books inside and pulls some outside, disturbing the alignment of the cover.)

So if you reorder the physical order of the books a bit, it reads more, that's interesting...

Sometimes we can read a negative or a positive number, we have a file for each theme, with thousands of RFID numbers, we walk around, and when the antenna of the reader finds the labels, it throws that number in the file and it decreases and when at the end we have ten books for instance, then we have to do something with those ten.

Do you do it every year?

We do it twice a year.

So then you know what books you have.

When we miss books we do another action and we ask the file of the missing books from the IT team.

Do you think every public library has a section about tapestries?

Yes, I think so.

How did the books in the tapestry sections ended up here?

We selected them ourselves. We get a first selection from an organization that works with all the public libraries in The Netherlands, NBD Biblion, that proposes us books. Only with cooking or embroidery books, we decided not to take them all because it's too much. They also do the hardcover and the plastic protection. Here (she points at the tapestry shelf) I see many old books indeed...But when it's a technical book, or a medical book...they become old fashioned. But

this subject, after twenty years, it's still ok.  
So in a way old books about medieval tapestries, they stay young... I saw that there are more books for children than philosophy books for example, can you explain me why?

Yes because they have other needs, it changes a lot from a child of nine months, or one year or two years old. And philosophy books... you can read them if you are twenty, forty or eighty years old, it doesn't change.

I asked another librarian that had a desk close to the tapestry section, Egge Altena, responsible of the art section. She is now working for eleven years at the OBA and studied at the Rietveld Academy.

I see that you changed the place of the books. When this happened, were people a bit confused?

Absolutely, you put the same books from the one side to another side and immediately you feel that materials are out of place. Hahaha it's just a matter of replacing, that's all...But your mind really gets into the groove of the space.

So how it is organized physically really impacts the way you think.

Definitely, it really does something to your mind.  
I wonder why the tapestry ended up at the end. Is it because it is less important?

No, it is the order of the art section, it starts with the number 700 for art and they have a whole floor to fill. It is a logical system.

What does "700" include?

It's the whole art section with material art like architecture, paintings and then living art like cinema, theatre.

Yes, so tapestry is at the end of the material art. Why is tapestry at the end, after painting, sculpture etc ?

It's because of the SISO<sup>10</sup>.

What is SISO?

We look at the SISO catalog together. It's a system that was created in 1958, the dutch standard based on the american Dewey system created in 1876.

Is there a discussion to change this system?

No, too much is going on. We need a stable structure because we have to deal with all the libraries at the same time and you know...

...librarians are conservative hahah.

Do you know, within the SISO system, how subcategories are hierarchized? I mean, for art for example?

Now I get what you are saying, I think that comes from the seven arts, which is a medieval hierarchization... I am not sure... It's a bit like: "what we have left, let's throw it there, at the end of the art section".

It's funny because my research is about how a medieval tapestry gets categorized in a library today and I find an order that comes from the medieval times...Do you think [the] tapestry can go away?

No...not tapestry...But I must say that we don't get books about painting anymore, so that is a section that is suffering. We now get a lot of books about art theory, it gets more important...

But if no one request the books about tapestry, will you then get rid of them?

It's a nightmare scenario but it's not impossible. It's not on people's mind to be interested in tapestry, you need specialists. It would be a pity because we have designers coming here interested in old techniques and they can find old books with really good information, so it's still really alive. Things that we will see tomorrow in design, might have been inspired by old books we have here. Have you taken a look downstairs?

No but I would love to see it, especially the little machine on wheels that reads the books.

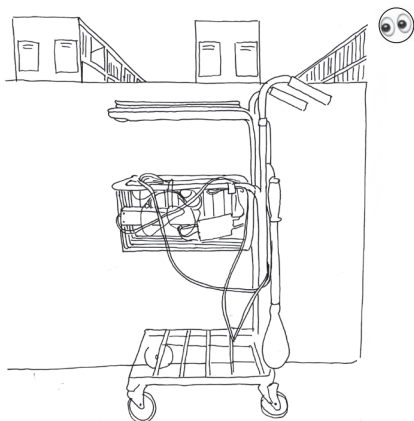
I can take you there at 16h30, after my meeting.

She took me to the ground floor to the storage space (storeroom); 🙄 plastic boxes full of books were piled up everywhere and behind this was an open space with people working at their desks. She showed me the trolley with the computer and the antenna, a metallic stick with a sort of flat plastic spoon. 🙄 We passed by shelves full of novels for elderly houses, children books for schools, books that were not meant to go into the library. We walked around different rooms filled with bookshelves and I didn't know where I was anymore.

\*



*OBA's storeroom.*



*Scanner device use to read RFID  
from the books of the OBA library.*

Are people really reading books in the library?

Most of the students that come here are not reading the books but I guess the presence of books creates a particular atmosphere for them to study... Also you don't feel lonely in a space filled with books.

Egge proudly activated a sensor and the shelves started to slide automatically, opening a corridor between them. She showed me the end of the art section on the ground floor and again books about tapestries were there. One red book was laying flat on the shelf about the *Lady and the Unicorn tapestries*.

These are the tapestries I am working on!

Oh... I know these tapestries.

They just left France for Australia, three days ago, they renovate the museum in Paris. Each tapestry took a different airplane, six airplanes in total, in case of a crash.

Hmm Australia? ... I don't know how they are going to react to the climate there, it's much warmer there. It's like paintings... Once I was part of a transport for an artist, from here to Santa Fe and when they arrived, the canvases were completely deformed because of the dry and hot air. It was a disaster.

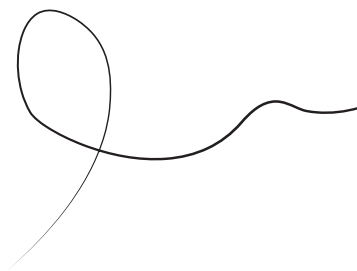
She explained to me something technical about the glue in books in reaction to air I don't remember.

Do you think the sweat of the fingers could damage the paper of books?

No problem there, the paper in the books is really resistant and fingers can go over it for hundreds of years.

As we walked back to the entrance, we ended the conversation with discussing the need of a practical order in public space, because yes...What matters is that people need to be able to find what they are looking for. Order influences the way information is categorized but also gives access to it. I remember noticing that we did not talk about online books and the need for physical books in the future. I left thinking about the library as a physical public space where categories are actually visible. Stiff in a way but also tangible, you can not remove them so easily. The fact that we can see that they all exist run one space really makes the difference with the internet. I have the feeling that online we can communicate and share more, it is more flexible, but also more directed. What we see is reduced to one square window that can give a lot of results, but is always following a certain pattern of thinking. 🌿

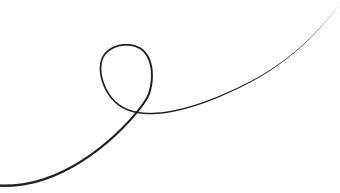




# 3

## The Tapestries on Google

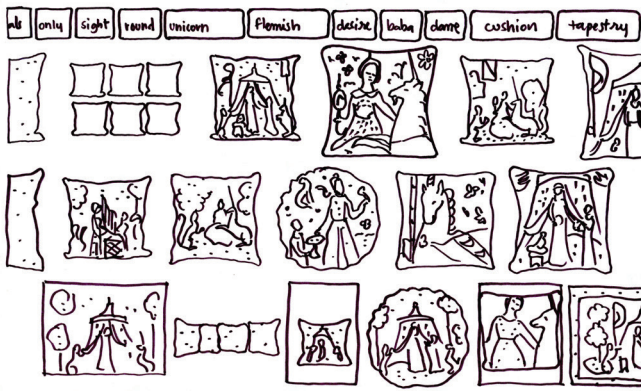
Searching for images of tapestries on Google, on my laptop screen. Seeing the artwork as a myth and a reproduction.



After visiting the library, I decided to continue my research on medieval tapestries, at home on my Mac to see how the topic was categorized on the internet. I observed how the results on Google Image Search can give a different vision and definition of the tapestries and how that interaction differs from the one I had with physical books.

When typing "tapestry", the search results show a panel of *The Unicorn Tapestries*, in the sixth position after tie-dye curtains. So I assume that *The Unicorn tapestries* are the most famous and popular of the medieval tapestries. When typing "Unicorn tapestries", it shows only medieval tapestries. But when typing the singular "Unicorn tapestry" it also shows derived products, textiles and non-textiles, cheaper versions of the tapestry and a publication from the museum. The plural or singular form of the word makes a difference in what Google shows us. It influences my vision of the object and of art in general as well, as if the inclusion of products in the search results confirms the value of an artwork. Does it mean that a masterpiece is a unique object and not a series of objects? Does it mean that the plural form is less searched for?

When typing "Unicorn tapestry", the resulting page shows a collection of twenty-six pictures that individually measure not more than five by six centimeters on my screen. From a glance they look like red and green squares filled with ornaments. It then looks like the emphasis is on the unicorn and



Google search images:  
 "Unicorn tapestries"  
 "Tapestry Cushion"

many pictures are reframed on the figure of the animal. I assume that this is because of the name of the object. *The Unicorn Tapestry* is reduced to the presence of the unicorn, as if it is the only thing of interest. The way the tapestry appears on Google is incomplete because of the engine itself that responds to search terms.

If I look at the result that Google gives me and if I imagine that myself not knowing that it is a tapestry, I guess I could take it for a painting named "*Unicorn tapestry*". The perspectivist space and the profusion of human characters piled up on a hill doing different actions bears similarities with medieval oil paintings on wood. "*Unicorn tapestry*" could be the name of a painting telling the story of a tapestry as a character. But a clue can help to identify the nature of the object: when the image is not resized, I can see that the edges of the picture inside are not straight and that it looks like a hanging fabric with wrinkled borders. Then I recognize it as a tapestry.

The results on Google show a mix of two different artworks having the same subject and it creates disorder. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York holds the green series: *The Hunt of the Unicorn*, displayed in the Cloisters, section of Medieval European Art. The Musée de Cluny or Middle Ages Museum in Paris holds the red series: *The Lady and the Unicorn*. Both series were weaved in the same atelier near Bruxelles, around the year 1500.

In both series, the last panel contradicts the narrative, making it enigmatic. In *The Hunt of the Unicorn*, the unicorn is tracked, captured and killed but is still alive in the last tapestry, rearing in a fence. In *The Lady and the Unicorn*, the characters perform five scenes that are believed to be corresponding to the five senses (*touching, tasting, smelling, hearing and seeing*), but the last panel shows the lady with a jewellery box in front of a tent. On Google Image, the tapestry had become to me a hybrid of meanings and it makes me think of the deformed digital picture described in the article of the New Yorker. All the tiles of images are precise, but they won't connect as a whole.

What we see on the internet is defined by search algorithms. We are guided in this, and the information we get is fluctuating, optimized and adapted to how others search. According to Google the "ranking systems sorts the hundreds of billions of webpages in our search index to give you useful and relevant results in a fraction of a second."<sup>11</sup> These ranking systems are made up of a series of algorithms that analyse what you are looking for and what information will be returned to you.

I try to think like a machine: What we think that art is, is determined by what we see. What we see is determined by what we search. What we search will determine what we buy. What we buy is determined by what we think.

Online, the information is displayed according to our taste and this is not the case when going out-

side. Instagram recommends to you what to look at according to what the application thinks you like because they want you to stay on it. While you think you are discovering and exchanging, you are in contact with a reflection of yourself, exploring the inside of a bubble. I realize that we create a world of images around us, renewing our lives with a constant flux of pictures, just like in the tapestry series *The Lady and the Unicorn*, where the lady performs in different sceneries but stands on the same island.

I also looked at amateur websites<sup>12</sup> made by tapestry lovers as a hobby or passion. These are often filled with quotes from medieval alchemy books, medieval songs, astrological literature, biblical and cabalistic texts, theology, and angel literature. On forums, people often share their love for the artwork, but they do not talk about the tapestry as an object or discuss the weaving techniques. To me, their passion seems to be a way of expressing a desire for purity and spirituality. These websites have a taste of the year 2000, with dark backgrounds and bright texts, when the internet was new and exciting, and bloggers were pioneers.

The last panel of the tapestry series *The Lady and the Unicorn* is often a source of discussion because no one knows what it really means. These unsolved questions seem to be part of the excitement of speculating on the intentions of the makers. The preoccupation is not about the physical existence of the object, but the idea that it exists.

If the tapestry would physically disappear, if the museum would burn, their love will not fail. The tapestry would survive as a image. A ficional New Age medieval Atlantis.<sup>13</sup>

The Google image search and the amateur websites gave me a hybrid version of the object, mixing all kind of categories, artistic or commercial. I saw different interpretations of the object, as a myth, a story, an artwork or a product. It made me reflect on how we perceive an artwork on the internet and how a search engine influences the way we see and think. I questioned how that perception online then influences the perception in real life.

The pictures we collect and share on social media are becoming data that is being sold. Without noticing it, we shape our own view on the world and stay in the same frame of reference. As shown in the panel (about the sense of) *Sight*, pictures act as a mirror for our own blindness, where the lady holds a mirror towards the unicorn who looks at itself, seeing its own reflection. The way we look at pictures reveals the knowledge we carry and what we see influences the way we think. 🌿





# 4

## The Tapestries Room

Visiting the Musée de Cluny of Paris and seeing the Tapestry.

I went to Paris and choose a flowery dress for the occasion, as if I was going to visit a sort of sanctuary. So as a connoisseur I arrived at the Musée de Cluny in Paris. Built inside the walls of a private hotel that was previously a roman thermal bath, it is clad by panels of wood imitating a stone fortress. As I stepped into the courtyard, I was crossing paths with people and we smiled as tapestry lovers on a common pilgrimage who recognized each other. Couples in their fifties, children, single ladies with medieval headbands.

After buying my ticket, I entered through the museum shop and saw piles of red cushions reproducing the image of the tapestry *The Lady and the Unicorn* that I previously saw on the internet. On the one hand I was comforted by the thought of getting closer to the tapestry and on the other hand I was disappointed as if the purpose of my trip was to buy a printed reproduction of the tapestry.



*Cushion*

I thought about the circulation of digital pictures of artworks on the internet, which increases the value of the physical objects. The red cushion featuring the tapestry became for me a sign of that loop, as if the pictures escaped the original object to circulate and at a certain point got caught as copies in a new object.<sup>14</sup>



*Interior of the shop;  
Cluny Museum, Paris.*

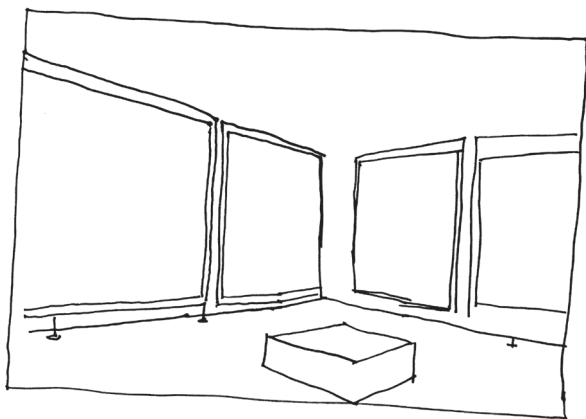


*Puzzle featuring the Lady  
and The Unicorn*

The interior of the museum was contrasting. I was expecting the room of the tapestries and all I saw was a small room with glazed ceramic objects followed by several multi-crafts rooms that seemed dark and messy. Then I entered a huge space with large scale sculptures excavated from the site of the museum. The building itself is historical but it's not really clear with what intention things are shown or not. A scaffolding stairs goes to the upper floor with a low ceiling, to a room with jewellery and metalwork and behind it the room of the tapestries. Many visitors seemed lost.

The museum gave me the feeling of being in a sort of medieval warehouse, with heavy objects on the ground floor and all the lighter objects upstairs. I thought about the historical information I read in the library about the tapestry as a nomadic wall that can be rolled and adjusted to the user's need. Easy transport was a quality shared by jewellery objects and tapestries, the fact that they ended up together on the upper floor of the museum seemed to follow the same practical logic. Compared to my interaction with the object on screen, where it appeared immediately, the museum was postponing the meeting again and again.

Still, somehow all the rooms created a context and were preparing me. The tapestries had a square room of their own. In the middle, there is a large bench covered with leather, some visitors were sitting on it, some were walking around. Other visitors came to talk to me and we were looking at the tapestries to-



*Room of the tapestries  
The Lady and the Unicorn,  
Cluny Museum, Paris.*

gether. Like the other visitors, I read in the brochure that the work is an allegory of the five senses.

I recognized some symbols I read about, like the coats of arms from Jean le Viste, and felt disappointed when I realized that when seeing the object in real life, it lost a bit of its aura. As I was there and made the whole trip to be physically present and reduce the distance between me and the tapestry, I tried to look at them as if I was someone that just discovered them and I asked myself: what do I really see?

As the tapestries are displayed on different walls, I needed to turn my head to look at the different scenes. The sceneries form a whole that can be grasped at once. They are next to each other in a sequence.

The motifs are all similar, but different to each other. In them, a lady is performing some gestures with accessories, sometimes she plays on a small organ, holds a box with jewellery, taking or putting back the necklaces. 🙄 The lady's feet are hidden by her dress, she seems to hover from one panel to another. The illusion of perspective is not perfect, but it all fits together. The narration remains hermetic, I feel that a lot is said in here and that could never be explained.

By chance I encountered a conservator in the room and asked:

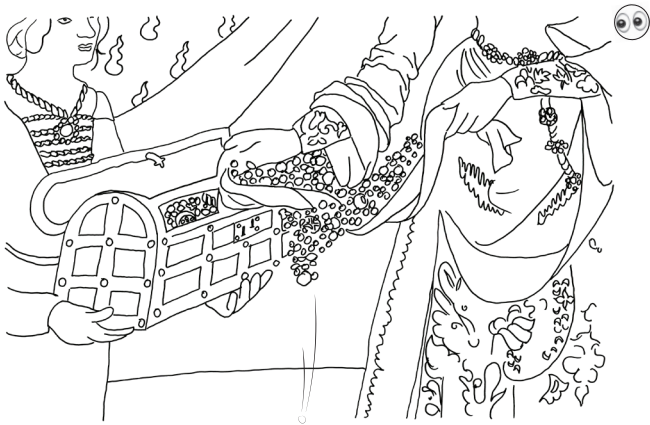
Do you know about the meaning of the last panel?

Well, that panel is the most mysterious, as you can see the lady is not wearing any jewellery anymore, putting them into a box held by the maiden.

Does she give the necklaces to the girl or does she just want to keep them in a safe?

No one knows but it may be symbolism, a sort of renouncement to the desire of possessing, to the terrestrial pleasures, after having experienced the five senses, the lady accesses a superior stage, a sixth sense, a sense that is not related to the physical body but the spiritual soul.

I thought about my own desire to come here and see the tapestry as a way to capture an essence. I let my eyes decide for themselves what they want to look at and they ended up staring at the red background.

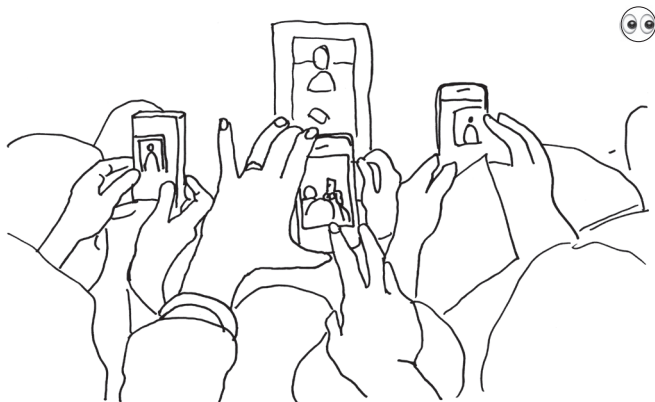


The room expanded; the tapestry became a space for my eyes, an atmosphere filled with holograms. I thought, this is a trick, it must be some painter's illusion.

○ I came closer to check how it was made and to see if the threads were from the same colours or had a variation of tones. Coming closer to the surface, I saw a striated relief causing deformations in the weave. The imperfect junction of threads reinforces the optical effect of depth. I started to think of the weavers, working side by side and connecting their drawings together. I wished that I could see the backside with the inverted image and all the knots.


I went back to sit in the middle of the room and thought that all those threads were like thoughts. All the knots behind them were the unconscious little gestures that form my being, the sensations, dreams,





*Illustration of the work:  
"Mona Lisa" by Martin Parr.*

fears and desire I experienced. I wanted to see the backside to understand how it was made, how I am made in the inside, to see how the threads are connected and how they relate to the frontside. Being in that room of the tapestry was like being in my own psyche. The walls around me started to be sort of membranes that swallowed me. There were no screens anymore between me and the tapestry, I was in their space. I took my phone and took a picture to record this moment. As I looked at the screen I realized that this would be the only visible trace I would keep with me when leaving the museum and felt a bit disappointed. I wondered if physical proximity to an artwork guarantee of a richer experience. We can fail to see, especially when we focus on seeing. I thought about the pictures I made of the tapestry

and how poor they were compared to my experience of sitting in front of them. I remembered the picture by artist *Martin Parr*,  where visitors in the Louvre are taking pictures of the *Mona Lisa* with their phones without really looking at it. I thought about this tendency we have to document what we see, with the idea that it is going to be revisited even though it is often not the case. I thought that being physically present to an object doesn't mean that you are present mentally.

Where does it come from, this desire to capture what we see? Can't we just see, as an ephemeral experience? Seeing without recording can make us able to use our eyes differently. Our eyes shouldn't be only tools to record, but also ephemeral doors to intuition. 🌿

—

~

# 5

## The Tapestry As a Plant Catalog

Drawings of flowers as a record of knowledge.



A visitor left the bench and I could move to sit in front of the tapestry that represents *Sight*. The ornamental plants seem flattened and caught in their growth, expanding their leaves on the surface of the tapestry. I look in particular at a tuft of green leaves with three yellow flowers at different maturation stages and one bud. The stems are exaggeratedly thin, with puffed articulations that seemed to fold under the weight of the tubes. It looks forced like a pose where a classical ballerina tries to express an effortless figure while being distorted in her body.

The drawings have a naturalistic precision but the expression is still stiff. I have the feeling of watching semi-alive plants. They imitate the movement of life, the leave curves gently while the core of the flower is still facing me.



I wonder how the weavers could make such a perfect image of a flower? What was their visual culture at the time? No pictures, no internet, no photographs, not even printed images yet. What kind of images of plants were circulating at the time? Do the same plants still exist?

Botanists of today can identify more than fifty species of plants in the tapestry *The Lady and the Unicorn*. On the panel named *Sight*, plants from all seasons are mixed up in a horticultural miracle.



*Daffodils from The Lady  
and the Unicorn tapestry*

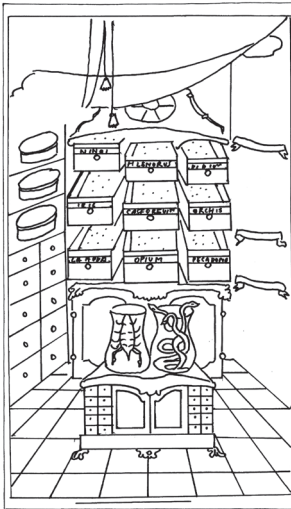
Daffodils that grow in early spring, are side by side with a holly tree that grows all year, but are a symbol of vegetal life in the heart of winter. Each plant has a symbolic meaning. But here it's not one particular meaning, but the profusion, the number of flowers. The tapestry was made thirty years before the first publication of a precise record of a plant.

According to Lawrence Crockett, professor of biology at the City University of New York, "*Many herbalists were still recopying works of the ancients rather than observing the plants themselves (...)* The designers of the Unicorn tapestries went directly to the source for their inspiration". He goes on saying that "*It is clear that, in northern Europe, botanical representation such as that in the Unicorn Tapestries was an important step toward the later scientific study of plant life.*"<sup>15</sup>

In medieval times, pictures of plants were drawn by hand in manuscripts copied from antiquity called *herbals* such as *De Materia Medica*.<sup>16</sup> 🧐

Plants were recorded for their utility, not as objects of study of themselves. The visual record of plants in medieval times focused on their medicinal properties and their symbolic or spiritual meaning. Recording all the existing plants “for the sake of knowing” only came later during the Renaissance period: authors of herbals were often curators of university gardens that studied the growth and reproduction cycle of the plants. Botany gradually emerged as an independent field, distinct from medicine and agriculture. *Herbals* were replaced by *Floras*: books that described the native plants of local regions. The first book showing a picture made from *In Vivo*<sup>17</sup> observation was done in 1530 by Otto Brunfels, *The Herbarum Vivae Icones*.<sup>18</sup> 🧐 The drawings became more detailed and later, the invention of the microscope stimulated the study of plant anatomy. Maybe the reason why these flowers look so real is because they originate from a new way of seeing. The weavers didn’t rely on their books and existing knowledge only, they also did field work, scouting for plants to use in the tapestry. The profusion of flower makes the tapestry looks like a catalog and they are too many to refer to a particular meaning.

The beginning of botanical study and the first flora, as a way of collecting pictures of the plants present in the surroundings, makes me think of what



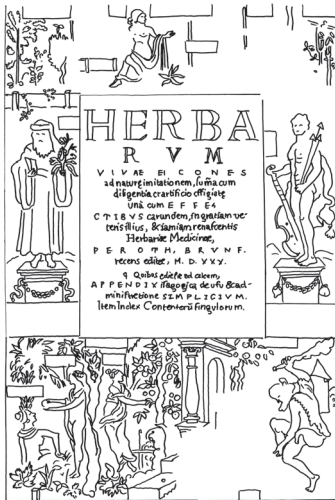
CAROLI LINNÆI  
DIOSCORIDIS  
**MATERIA  
MEDICA,**  
LIBER I DE PLANTIS

Secundum  
 Genera      Digressiones      Synonyma  
 Loca        Durationes        Culturas  
 Nomina     Simplicia        Preparatas  
 Qualitates Modos        Potentias  
 Vires        Usus  
 Digestus



H O L M I Æ

Anno 1745





we do we with our phones now, making records of our direct surroundings. Taking pictures without return and analysis, just for the goal of recording can be seen as opposite to the scientific methodology that uses a special framework, codes and rules when archiving and cataloguing. But it seems that it originates from the same human desire of recording what you see, a digital way of collecting. 🍀







# Conclusion



As I looked back on my different ways of interacting with the tapestry, I realized that in every case the object was uncovering not only itself, but also my way of seeing. It made me question about our tools to see and think about how we use technology and how it impacts the way we interact with our physical environment. I questioned more specifically the capacity of digital technology to record images and the human desire to capture and collect pictures. Why do we want to capture what we see? Reading the online article of the New Yorker, the failed attempt of recording a picture of the tapestry, I questioned the use of technology by conservators and the desire to capture pictures of objects.



Walking through the public library, I looked at how information is displayed physically and the importance of the visibility of that knowledge. The interaction of our body in the space relate to the way we think. I realized how the acts of reading books involves sight both as sense and information recorder. The conversations with librarians gave me more insight about how we categorize knowledge.

At home, on the screen of my laptop, I observed the online presence of the tapestry both as a product and as a myth. On screen, the object is reduced to an image without a body. I observed how

what we see is determined by search algorithms and how it impacts the comprehension of the object. Algorithms influence the way we see and think.

In the space of the museum, I had a physical connection with the object based on the senses. I experienced how seeing is related to moving your body in the space and that the sensation of being with the artwork can not be recorded by a picture.

I Realized that our eyes are not only tool to record but also ephemeral doors to intuition. Seating on the museum bench, I observed a detail in the tapestry, a flower. I had the feeling of watching semi-alive plants and wondered if they were made from real plants or from visual record of plant. I researched about the history of botany and the desire of collecting pictures of plants that took place in the beginning of the Renaissance, just after the tapestry was made.

By considering the tools now used to dissect the tapestry and in greater perspective the world around us, we now have a more precise view of nature. We have tools to record and conserve but what kind of knowledge do we get from them? Making a record flattens, like plants pressed in herbals.

The digitalization of textures loses information and the interaction with pictures of three dimensional objects lacks sensoriality. Making a record will automatically create an order and place the recorded object into a category. Making a record can preserve, explain, show, keep, transform, educate, explore, understand but it can also



destroy, modify, wound and reduce. We try to understand everything to capture what we see into knowledge, to put things in a box. We created tools to categorize the world around us. By capturing we destroy and by zooming in to understand we create a distance and disconnect, missing the essence. What has begun with recording and the scientific method has ended with a collective obsession with collecting and categorizing.

We should never forget that tools and categories create context with determine what meaning we will give to what we see. Even more now things are becoming digital, and our very selection of what we see is used as a product. Like capturing the unicorn, it is a form of greed without substance and what we record to understand becomes wounded and loses meaning. What we think and

how we interact with the world is getting dependent on external tools, and algorithms that have no other goal than to trap us in even more collecting, narrow us in our own bubble.

Being made at the turning point of the medieval and renaissance era, the *Unicorn Tapestry Series* present the friction between looking outward to understand the world, using classification and logic, and inward, using the senses and reflection. We lost something since the medieval ages, which had a different perspective on experiencing the senses and the world with no tools for recording and where materials was linked to the spirit.

Our eyes are not only tools. And only tools to measure and record the world will not enhance our sight but narrow our view. Our sight is one of the senses: something to be felt and experienced as a goal in itself. When using our eyes as a sense instead of only a tool, sight is a gateway to our inner world. 🌿





*The Lady and the Unicorn* is the title given to a series of six tapestries woven near Brussels around 1500 from wool and silk. The set is on display in the Musée de Cluny in Paris. 🙄

The series present a meditation on earthly pleasures and courtly culture, offered through an allegory of the five senses. They are hanged in the Museum following a hierarchy of senses from the considered as the most 'material' to the most 'spiritual' senses: touch, taste, smell, hear, see and a sixth sense.

- ① *Touch*. The lady stands with one hand touching the unicorn's horn.
- ② *Taste*. The lady is taking sweets from a dish held by a maidservant.
- ③ *Smell*. The lady stands, making a wreath of flowers. Her maidservant holds a basket of flowers within her easy reach.
- ④ *Hear*. The lady plays a portative organ on top of a table.
- ⑤ *Sight*. The lady is seated, holding a mirror up in her right hand. The unicorn kneels on the ground, with his front legs in the lady's lap, from which he gazes at his reflection in the mirror.
- ⑥ *À Mon Seul Désir*. The lady stands in front of a tent, across the top of which is written "À Mon Seul Désir", an obscure motto, variously interpretable as "by my will alone". Her maidservant stands to the right, holding an open box. The lady is placing the necklace she wears in the other tapestries into the box.

1



2





3



4

5







*The Hunt Of The Unicorn* is the title given to a series of seven tapestries woven near Brussels between 1495-1505, from wool warp, wool, silk, silver and gilt wefts. The set is on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art Cloisters, Gallery 17. 🙄

The tapestries show a group of noblemen and hunters in pursuit of a unicorn. The hunt for the Unicorn was a common theme in late medieval and renaissance works of art and literature. The tapestries show pagan and christian symbolism, possible allegory of true love.

- ① *The Hunters Enter The Woods.*
- ② *The Unicorn is found.*
- ③ *The Unicorn is attacked.*
- ④ *The Unicorn defends itself.*
- ⑤ *The mystic hunt of the Unicorn.*
- ⑥ *The Unicorn is killed and brought to the Castle.*
- ⑦ *The Unicorn is in Captivity and no longer dead.*



1



2





3



4

5



6





2

1

1

## NOTES

01. *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* W. J.T. Mitchell, The University of Chicago Press, 2015.
02. *Lady and the Unicorn tapestry brought back to life, 'Mona Lisa of woven artworks'*, Kim Willsher, The Guardian, December 28, 2013 Issue.
03. *Capturing The Unicorn, How Two Mathematicians Came To The Aid Of The MET*, Richard Preston, Art & Science, The New Yorker, April 11 issue, 2005.
04. *The surviving image Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms, Aby Warburg's History of Art*, Georges Didi-Huberman, translation H. Mendelsohn, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016.
05. *Zero and Ones*, Sadie Plant, Fourth Estate, London, 1998.
06. a) *Another view of The Mystic Hunt of the Unicorn tapestry*, by Frances Lennard on Textile conservation. A blog about textile conservation at the University of Glasgow. b) Research report from the Institute Collectie Nederland, *Tapestry conservation, Support Methods and Fabrics for tapestries*. The full document is available online: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/296331790\\_Tapestry\\_Conservation\\_Part\\_I\\_II](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/296331790_Tapestry_Conservation_Part_I_II).
07. *The Bayeux Tapestry: The Complete Tapestry*, David M. Wilson, Thames and Hudson, 2004.
08. *Tapestry In The Baroque: New Aspects Of Production And Patronage*, Thomas P. Campbell and Elizabeth A. H. Cleland, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Yale University Press, 2010.
09. a) *Tapestry*, Barty Phillips, Phaidon, 1994, London. *A Feast for the Eyes: Art, Performance, and the Late Medieval Banquet*, Christina Normore, The University of Chicago Press, 2015. b) *Tapestry as a Medium of Propaganda at the Court of Louis XIV: Display and Audience*, Florian Knothe in *Tapestry in the Baroque, New aspects of production and patronage*, Thomas P. Campbell, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

- Symposia, Yale University Press, 2010. c), d) *La tapisserie médiévale au musée de Cluny*, Fabienne Joubert, Edition de la réunion des musées nationaux, 1987, Paris. e) *La Dame à la Licorne*, Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, Conservateur au musée de Cluny, Editions de la réunion des Musées nationaux, 1978, Paris.
10. *SISO: Schema voor Indeling van de Systematische catalogus in Openbare bibliotheken or better Schedule for the Classification of the Systematic Catalog in Public Libraries.*
  11. From Google official webpage.
  12. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-mystery-mets-unicorn-tapestries-remains-unsolved>
  13. *Atlantis*, city of Atlantis, a legendary island, said to have existed in the Atlantic Ocean west of Gibraltar and to have sunk beneath the sea. The island was first mentioned by Plato's dialogues *Timaeus* of Locri, both written in c.360 b.c.e.
  14. *Uncomputable's*, Agnieszka Kurant, Cabinet Magazine, Issue 61, 2016.
  15. *The Identification of a Plant in the Unicorn Tapestries* by Lawrence Crockett, Metropolitan Museum Journal, v. 17, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1982.
  16. *De Materia Medica* is a pharmacopoeia of herbs written by a greek physician, Dioscorides, 50–70 AD.
  17. *In Vivo*, Latin for "whitin the living". Scientific method when the effect of biological entities are tasted on whole living organisms.
  18. *Herbarium vivae icones*, Otto Brunfels (1470-1534). (Strasbourg, 1530-1536 can be found on the Linda Hall Library <http://lhdigital.lindahall.org>, Independent research library devoted to science and technology.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ◇ *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics*, W.T.J Mitchell, University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- ◇ *The Surviving Image, Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*, Georges Didi-Huberman, translation H. Mendelsohn, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016.
- ◇ *Zero and Ones*, Sadie Plant, Fourth Estate, London, 1998.
- ◇ *Tapestry*, Barty Phillips, Phaidon, 1994, London
- ◇ *A Feast for the Eyes: Art, Performance, and the Late Medieval Banquet*, Christina Normore, The University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- ◇ *Tapestry as a Medium of Propaganda at the Court of Louis XIV: Display and Audience*, Florian Knothe in *Tapestry in the Baroque, New aspects of production and patronage*, Thomas P. Campbell, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Symposia, Yale University Press, 2010.
- ◇ *La tapisserie médiévale au musée de Cluny*, Fabienne Joubert, Edition de la réunion des musées nationaux, 1987, Paris.
- ◇ *La Dame à la Licorne*, Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, Conservateur au musée de Cluny, Editions de la réunion des Musées nationaux, 1978, Paris.
- ◇ *The identification of a plant in the Unicorn Tapestries*, Lawrence Crockett, The Metropolitan Museum Journal 17, 1984, New York.
- ◇ *Mechanism, Experiment, Disease, Marcello Malpighi and seventeenth century anatomy*, Domenico Bertolini Meli, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

### Articles & Online bibliography:

- ◇ *Uncomputable's*, Agnieszka Kurant, Cabinet issue 61, 2016.
- ◇ *Tapestry conservation, Support Methods and Fabrics for tapestries*, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/296331790\\_Tapestry\\_Conservation\\_Part\\_I\\_II](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/296331790_Tapestry_Conservation_Part_I_II).
- ◇ *Lady and the Unicorn tapestry brought back to life 'Mona Lisa of woven artworks*, Kim Willsher, The Guardian, December 28, 2013 issue.



- ◇ *Capturing the Unicorn, How two mathematicians came to the aid of the Met*, Richard Preston, New Yorker, Art and Science, April 11, 2005 issue.
- ◇ *The Mystic Hunt of the Unicorn tapestry*, Frances Lennard. A Blog about Textile Conservation from the University of Glasgow: [textileconservation.academicblogs.co.uk](http://textileconservation.academicblogs.co.uk).
- ◇ *Herbarium vivae icones*, Otto Brunfels, 1530, Strasburg, <http://lhldigital.lindahall.org>

### **Secondary bibliography:**

- ◇ *Practices of looking, an introduction to visual culture*, Marita Sturgeon and Lisa Cartwright, Oxford University Press, 2009.
- ◇ *The painter of modern life and others essays*, Charles Baudelaire (1863), Jonathan Mayne, Phaidon, 1964, London.
- ◇ *The Notebooks of Malte Lauris Brigge*, Rainer Maria Rilke, (1910), William Needham, Wolf Pup Books, 2013.
- ◇ *Eye for details, Images of Plants and Animals in Art and Science (1500–1630)*, Florike Egmond, Reaktion Books, 2017.
- ◇ *Visual textiles: A study of appearance and visual impression in archeological textiles*, Lena Harmmalund in *Medieval clothing and textiles*, Volume 4, The Boydell press, 2008.
- ◇ *Art and the Senses*, Francesca Bacci and David Melcher, Oxford University Press, 2013.
- ◇ *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger, Penguin books, 1972.
- ◇ *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images*, W. J.T. Mitchell, The University of Chicago Press, 2005.



*Learning From Tapestries*

Lisa Plaut

Graduation Thesis

Jewellery-Linking bodies Department

Gerrit Rietveld Academie

2018

Graphic Design: Alexander Übehlör

Typeset in Palatino and DearSirMadam

Thesis guidance: Angela Jerardi

Thanks to:

Sonja Bäümel, Egge Atena,

Elly Dehler, Jorik Amit Galema;

Carl Johan Jacobsen.



