

THE HUNT OF THE UNICORN

DECEMBER 12, 2015 – JANUARY 23, 2016



THE UNICORN TAPESTRIES, designed in Paris and likely woven around 1500 in Brussels, today hang in The Cloisters Museum, The Metropolitan Museum's collection of Gothic and Romanesque art located in Fort Tryon Park in Washington Heights. The tapestries, made in wool with silk and metallic threads throughout the weft, were probably not made as a single set of tapestries as they vary in size and composition, but they were brought together in a chateau in France by the seventeenth century. Despite their being looted during the French Revolution, they were back together by the mid-nineteenth century to be later purchased by John D. Rockefeller Jr. in 1923 who eventually gave them to the Cloisters in 1937, where they have become an iconic symbol of the collection.

At the Cloisters the tapestries are democratized, hanging in a public museum for all to see, bucking their past as the highest art form of the late middle ages. Originally, these were surely an elite commission, possibly to commemorate the marriage of a noble couple whose names are now lost to us (the A and E found in some of the tapestries). The theme of marriage is also suggested by the numerous references to love and fecundity symbolized by the myriad flora and fauna of the tapestries. Gathered here are the works of seven artists who respond to the tapestries in a series of fascinating pieces, one for each tapestry in the Cloisters, making The Hunt of the Unicorn series resonate for the 2015 viewer, as they did for their medieval audience.

Boy Kong's piece mirrors the provenance of the original tapestries in his *The Unicorn Defends itself*. Painted on separate panels and shipped from Florida to be reassembled here in New York, it hearkens to medieval tapestry sets, like these at the Cloisters, that were made to be transported to different rooms or even homes, as the noble

owners moved to winter or summer in a different residence. Kong focuses on the battle of the animals, removing the hunters themselves, the dogs serving in the infantry, sent in to maim or be maimed in the desperate fight to attain to the magical beast. Despite the scene's violence, heightened by the mis-alignment of the panels, the artist also highlights the decorative – the bright flowers, day-glo colors, the eye-catching duck – which was the primary purpose of the tapestries, in addition to their functioning as insulation in a drafty stone hall. The Unicorn Tapestries were not only decorative but they also delighted their elite medieval viewers with timely themes of courtship, symbolized by the hunt, that conjured courtly dramas of the day; fashionable clothing styles and coifs, reflecting their original audience; and the pastime of hunting itself. Hunting parties, a leisurely pursuit for the nobility, were tinged with danger, as hunters were merely armed with arrows and swords against truly ferocious beasts such as bears. The woods often served as a leitmotif in medieval tales for the unknown, wild, and uncontrollable world outside the safe boundaries of civilization. Graham Preston's work seizes on this underlying feeling of foreboding danger, and unbridled emotions and sexuality, especially as the hunt begins in the darkened forest. Preston situates us in the woods, peering through the trees at the beast/woman confronting us, but we can't quite see her. She is beautiful, and just out of reach, like a unicorn, and enveloped in the dense foliage of the forest.

Like the medieval designers of the tapestries, the artists in this exhibition often layer their paintings with symbols and references to contemporary life. The Unicorn is in Captivity and No Longer Dead by Peter Daverington is artificially aged and straightforwardly copies many of the more than 100 plant species (over 80 of which have been identified by scholars) in the millefleurs background of

the Unicorn tapestries. The unicorn itself though is that of the 1980's *My Little Pony* or Lisa Frank brand products, flaunting its rainbow-kitsch mane and tail.

Liz Adams Jones also plays with time in *The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle*, by creating an imaginary world where we falter between past and present, the world of the castle in the background and the yard of the 1950s ranch-style house. The animals killing the unicorn, and indeed the artist herself, wear medieval dress, or perhaps the anachronistic and fantastical clothing of Medieval and Renaissance fairs. Despite the medievalizing details, the contemporary narrative wins out: the artist's presence in the work, not only in her self-portrait but in the entire scene which in her own words is a metaphor for her "personal journey to become [her] true self," would have been completely foreign to the anonymous medieval team – designer, dyers, weaver and assistants – who worked on the original tapestries. Because the artist(s) was often unknown in medieval works of all kinds, it is the patron whose name comes down to us and is often considered responsible for the work of art. Written records suggest that patrons were very specific in their requests, asking for certain iconography possibly choosing motifs from pattern books, and selecting type and amount of materials to be used, including, for example, the weight of the gold thread. The patrons of the Unicorn Tapestries have eluded scholars despite the prominent AE monogrammed, sometimes multiple times in a single tapestry, throughout the works. Gabriel Giucci features the cipher as his subject. Like a graffiti tag, seeming to lose its legibility as we stare at it, the AE remains anonymous. Cropped at the edges to suggest a fragment, reminds us of the fragmentary condition of the tapestries and our knowledge of the origins of these works.

Jason Covert's piece, *By The Light of the Stars Does Innocence Falter*, conjures the Christological interpretation of the tapestries, which was a pet theory of scholars more than a conception of medievals themselves. The Unicorn, as one who is killed and yet immortal, is Christ; Covert has crucified an arrow-ridden hide onto a driftwood base. To my mind, I also see decimation of our planet symbolized by two threatened species in the Arctic, the narwhal, whose tusk, standing in for a unicorn's, lies bloodied, in an unnaturally black, oily blood, and the polar bear, to which the broad white horse pelt refers.

As the Unicorn Tapestries themselves today live in a Washington Heights Park, it is fitting that Tom Sanford has reimagined the Unicorn is Found as a local playground with a cacophony of children gathering to see the "unicorn," a dog with paper towel roll strapped to his head. It is amusing to imagine the city water fountain as a version of the tapestry's marble fountain purified by the unicorn's horn. Littered with symbols from the Ballantine Ale can to the emblazoned t-shirts worn by the various figures, the enjoyment of this painting is in deciphering the meanings of each detail, which must have been the pleasure for the medieval viewer as well, who we can imagine banqueting beneath these tapestries in the great hall of a noble, within a castle on a hill.

Jennifer L. Ball

Brooklyn College · Department Chairperson - Art

Jennifer L. Ball teaches Byzantine, medieval and Islamic art. Her current project, for which she has just been awarded the 2014-15 Mellon Fellowship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is "Habit Forming: Representations of Byzantine Monastics 9th-15th Centuries." Her research interests have been in portraits, dress and textiles, especially her 2006 book *Byzantine Dress: Representations of Secular Dress in Eighth- to Twelfth-century Painting* (Palgrave). She was a contributor to *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition* (2012), is a frequent lecturer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and has published on liturgical textiles and Byzantine-Islamic visual culture.

THE HUNTERS ENTER THE WOODS

GRAHAM PRESTON

OF WALLS AND BARS, TO NIGHT-FREE INFINITY, 2015

ACRYLIC AND OIL ON MULTIPLE WOOD PANELS · 62 X 48 X 3 IN. [157.5 X 122 X 7.5 CM]

"When I started this painting/paintings, I had no idea what the hell I was going to do. I took a walk through the woods and snapped a bunch of photos for reference and then I just started painting. The landscape you see is made up. It's nothing special, perhaps underwhelming, it's simply an entrance into a romanticized wilderness that is eerily still... just light and foliage. The woods are like that most of the time- with the exception of the wind and the occasional squirrel. But also, the woods are a place for things to live and die, it's LIFE in raw form and has a very similar quality to the ocean; you can get lost in it."



THE UNICORN IS ATTACKED

JASON COVERT

BY THE LIGHT OF THE STARS DOES INNOCENCE FALTER, 2015

MIXED MEDIA · 66 ½ X 67 X 16 IN. [169 X 170 X 40.5 CMs]

"The piece is assembled from drift wood harvested from New York Harbor, iron nails, circa 1800's, from the boards of a CT barn, a wet tanned horsehide from Niagara Falls, NY, handmade bamboo long arrows from China, a casting of a Narwhal horn from New Mexico, a synthetic blood pool from Canada, and various electronics sourced from the wild wild web. The light pattern is created by LEDs which are arranged in the pattern of the Monoceros constellation (Greek for Unicorn) and they wax and wane as a real constellation would."



THE UNICORN DEFENDS ITSELF

BOY KONG

LIKE A SITTING DUCK, 2015

ACRYLIC, SPRAY PAINT AND COLOR PENCILS ON [25] PANELS · 60 X 60 IN. [152.5 X 152.5 CMS]

"I wanted to paint the unicorn defending itself because I like how the dog is stabbed in the original tapestry and wanted to highlight that moment. That's why I left out the hunters, except for one human in the corner. You know, go straight to the climax. Dog gets stabbed in the neck. Yay. Truth is, I wanted to paint this tapestry because of the mallard at the bottom of the piece. I really wanted to paint that duck."



THE MYSTIC CAPTURE OF THE UNICORN (TWO FRAGMENTS)

GABRIEL GIUCCI

AE, 2015

LATEX ON CANVAS · 50 X 35 IN. [127 X 89 CMS]

"I focused on the "AE" monogram that appears throughout the tapestries, which I found to be both mysterious and quiet, but having a strong visual presence. To me, they resemble the industrial logos that I constantly see on the trucks and corporations in Brooklyn, and which have been a focus of my recent paintings. I fragmented and repeated the monograms, creating a deep green web in which they appear broken and incomplete, so as to form a forest of monograms in which the legible words scarcely appear."



THE UNICORN IS KILLED AND BROUGHT TO THE CASTLE

LIZ ADAMS-JONES

THE UNICORN IS KILLED AND BROUGHT TO THE CASTLE, 2015

OIL ON LINEN · 62 X 62 IN. [157.5 X 157.5 CMS]

"I reinterpreted the tapestry as a narrative that is symbolically about my personal journey to become my true self. Moving away from old dogmas and traditions that are traps, I am embarking toward my own destiny. This journey is scary and treacherous, and often heartbreaking. But there is hope as the gates that would imprison me with fear are left open for exploring. Although I carry the weight of the past with me symbolized by the dead unicorn, there is excitement in the unknown world beyond."



THE UNICORN IN CAPTIVITY

PETER DAVERINGTON

THE UNICORN IN CAPTIVITY, 2015

OIL AND GOLD LEAF ON LINEN · 60 X 48 IN. [152.5 X 122 CMS]

“The image has rough edges of exposed linen to give the impression that this was a fresco removed from its original location and attached to linen. The surface is bruised and cracked from a process of crumpling and folding the painting to break the surface, which leads to scars and miniature lacunae in the surface. This adds age and an almost tapestry like suppleness to the painting.”

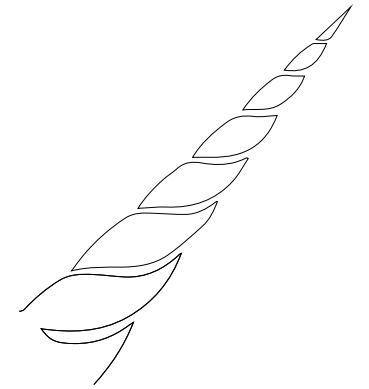


***PAIN*T YOUR OWN UNICORN!**

ARTIST

TITLE
..... ON PAPERX.....IN. [.....X.....CMS]

"My unicorn





PHOTOS OF THE UNICORN TAPESTRIES COURTESY OF
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
ALL OTHER PHOTOS COURTESY OF Gitler & _____
DESIGN WWW.HERZBLUTO2.DE

THE HUNTERS

JASON COVERT

PETER DAVERINGTON

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TOM SANFORD