PAINTED WALL TAPESTRIES
NOTES

Summary
These notes are background information about the painted wall tapestries that Lady Eva von Danzig and I painted for use in the Barony of Innilgard to enhance the display at events with 15th century themes. Their first showing was at La Prova Dura in September 2010.

The notes will cover subject matter, materials and method as well as the making up of the tapestries and storage.

History of 15thC tapestries
“The greatest tapestries of the 15th century were produced in the Flemish cities of Arras, Tournai, and Brussels. In the first half of the century it was Arras that particularly prospered under the patronage of the dukes of Burgundy. Duke Philip the Good (1396–1467) had a specially designed building erected in the city to allow for better conservation of his tapestry collection. Between 1423 and 1467 no fewer than 59 master tapestry weavers were working in Arras, but following the French siege of the city in 1477 under King Louis XI the industry declined.” (Encyclopaedia Britannica.)

Subject Matter
You can find many examples of suitable subjects to paint as wall hangings. In keeping with our aim to paint 15th century pieces it became obvious that we should look in the rich area of Mille Fleur (Thousand flowers) range of tapestries woven in the late 15th and early 16th century in France and Flanders.

For the first project we settled on the Lady and the Unicorn tapestry À mon seul désir, a 15th century Flemish wool and silk tapestry (See below). This is the 6th tapestry in the Lady and the Unicorn series, the others depicting the five senses - Taste, Hearing, Sight, Smell and Touch. The original is in the Cluny Museum, Paris.

This choice was made for a number of reasons. I happened to have a piece of material that was of a similar background colour, and the piece was the right weave and the right size for a wall hanging. We might have a go at the other 5 one day (maybe).

The Lord and Lady tapestries were based on a 15th century mille fleur tapestry reputedly from Arras (See below). The Knight depicted is Jean de Daillon, officer and advisor to France's King Charles VIII. He bears here the ”wolf” banner and is wearing full battle array. The original is now in Montecut House in England.

Lady and the Unicorn
Jean de Daillon
Hercules
Variations
In the case of the lady and the Unicorn piece we did not want to copy the original exactly as there was original heraldry and a motto involved. So we replaced the heraldry with our own devices and charges (Aylwin’s and mine) and replaced the wording on the tent À mon seul désir with Innigard’s motto “Noli minimis dolere.” (Don’t fret the small stuff).

The two smaller side tapestries are taken from elements of the Lady and the Unicorn tapestry to act as supporters for the main piece and hang either side of it. Again the heraldry was changed to reflect ours.

The Lord tapestry was modified to replace the heraldry with the Lochac and Barony devices, Aylwin’s main charge on the banner and the lettering on the horse caparison from IE to IA (Ingerith and Aylwin). The face of the lord was also changed. The Lady tapestry was made to be a mirror image of the Lord with my heraldry and a completely new design for the caparison based on the Hercules on Mount Olympus tapestry made in the late 15th century in Burgundy (See above). The original is housed in the Burrell Collection in Glasgow.

Materials
Fabric for the Lady and the Unicorn tapestries
Heavy canvas is an obvious fabric to use for painted tapestries and we would have bought canvas, except that I had in my fabric stash that matched the colour of the Lady and the Unicorn tapestries very well and was both heavy and in a canvas weave. There was enough to also make the two small side tapestries. The fabric was 150 cm. wide and we used the whole width to paint these tapestries.

Fabric for the Lord and Lady tapestries
Again heavy canvas would be ideal for these tapestries but this time I had enough heavyweight black cotton drill in my stash to make them. Cotton drill is not ideal to paint on as the weave has a strong bias (diagonal) in the weave but by applying more paint to fill in the grooves, you can overcome that.

As I had leftover student acrylics from my daughter’s university course I chose to use acrylics. In any case I would not use oils for these projects as they take a long time to dry and I was not sure how the tapestries would keep. We decided not to use period paints, as our aim was to make tapestries that could be made by anyone with a limited budget. Depending on the colours you use you need to be prepared to use up several tubes of paint.

The best colours to use on these tapestries are the heraldic colours together a bright gold. We chose not to use metallic silver for the armour, rather used blended white and black to create shades of grey.

Brushes
Again I used left over brushes from my daughter’s collection, but I did go out and buy chisel brushes (good for lines) and very fine brushes for the fine details. As acrylics are water based, the brushes wash out easily in water.

Method
Painting a large tapestry can be done freehand if you have the skills. The danger is that the proportions may not be right. To avoid this we followed the same procedure for all five tapestries.

After deciding on the subject matter for each tapestry we identified the main feature. In the case of the Lady and the Unicorn the main features were the tent and trees, for the Lord and Lady it was the horse, figure and flag; for the two side panels it was the lion, the unicorn and the background tree.

Ingerith Ryzka, Easter 2011 Suth Moot
(Margareta Nicholas)
The tapestries were found in my copy of Heraldry: sources, symbols and meaning by Ottfried Neubecker so Eva traced the main elements onto A4 paper and took the tracing into Office Works and had it enlarged to AO size. I went over the enlargement with black felt pen to make the lines stand out.

We then tried a few ways to transfer the drawing onto the fabric. If you have a lightly woven fabric such as calico, you can use a light table or tape the drawing to the window and then the fabric over the top to transfer the lines, but as our fabrics were both dark and heavy, we cut out the outline of the main figure and traced around the outline with pencil.

Then the whole traced area was painted with white paint to create a good ground for the other colours. The base coat does not need to be solid to hide the colour of the fabric below as the more layers of paint you apply the greater the risk of cracking. We chose not to wash the fabric first (to keep in the sizing) or to add fabric fixative or put a coat of sealer on the fabric first. Perhaps in hindsight we should have but we will see how the tapestries fair as time goes by.

Once the base white coat was dry Eva used a pencil to lightly draw in the features of the main figures. Throughout the work she focused on the fine detail of the main figures while I focused on the backgrounds.

I undertook to paint in all of the flowers and the trees while Eva worked on the figures, the animals and the shading throughout the tapestries. We joked that she is good at fine detail while I am happy to work on the “gross” elements.

Identifying the flowers was not easy as, in my reading I found that these were rather stylised, so I did not worry too much about being botanically correct. The trees however, were eventually identified as being orange, oak, pine and holly.

To have some consistency of shape we cut out stencils for some of the flowers. I drew in the basic flower groupings and leaves and then mixed colours to match as much as possible the colours in the tapestry I was copying. Mille fleur tapestries typically have thousands of flowers woven into the background. I found that I could not copy the background exactly as depicted so I concentrated on painting it in so it looked as filled in as possible. It was easier to do this for the Lady and the Unicorn tapestry than the Lord and Lady tapestries because there were a lot less flowers in it.

**Specifics**

Some hints on painting and finishing:

- To get a very intense gold, first cover the ground in red, then apply the gold over the top
- To match colours to the tapestries, mix and water down the paints
- Black cotton drill weave creates lines in the paint surface. You need to apply the paint thickly to overcome the lined look
- Yellow and red are poor colours to apply to black fabric. You need to apply many coats, or first paint the surface in white and then apply the other colour
- A nice touch is to sew pearls to the lady’s headpiece and bodice. We toyed with the idea of sewing jewels into the casket but chose not to
- The design on the lady on the horse dress was done freehand using the eye to determine spacing. Ditto for the goutty d’eau on the tent. Don’t be overly anxious to paint in exact spacing. After all these tapestries are designed to be viewed from afar rather than close up.
A word of advice
These projects represent months of constant, painstaking work. Waiting for paint to dry takes time, working on flower backgrounds takes days. I estimated that to do a foot square of flower background took me around 3 hours. Working on these projects at night is bad for the eyes. Hunched over the table painting is bad for the back and arms. We used a kitchen egg timer (a chicken in our case) to measure time (30 min. sessions) and we were surprised at how quickly the chicken “exploded”. You do need to pace yourself. So if you are planning to start this sort of project give yourself at least a year to complete it if you have an event deadline.

Making Up
I used cotton tape to edge all the tapestries and to make the hanging tabs. You can also make a casing if you prefer. The red and blue tape was a little bright so I dyed both tapes to make the red and blue hues richer. The backing fabric was some blue cotton drill I had in my stash. The painted fabric is heavy enough that you do not need weights.

The final pieces do not hang complete flat creating a rather pleasing effect.

Storing
As multiple layers of paint tend to make fabric crack if it is folded I decided to roll the tapestries around a cardboard fabric tube (free from Spotlight) with the painted surface to the outside. I made cotton duck bags with a tie for each tapestry. Each bag has a handful of desiccant to deter moisture.

Sources
This paper is a very good overview of painted pieces in period.
http://www.currentmiddleages.org/artsci/docs/Whips_Angels.pdf

Some tapestries suitable for 15th C painting projects

Lady and the Unicorn
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lady_and_the_ Unicorn

The Hunt of the Unicorn

The Triumph of Death, or the Three Fates
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mille-fleur

The departure of the Prodigal Son
Musee National du Moyen Age

La Vie Seigneuriale
Musee National du Moyen Age

Devonshire Hunting tapestries
http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/textiles/stories/Devonshire_tapestries/index.Html

Other links
Famous tapestries
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tapestry#Famous_tapestries
(Some out of period)

V&A collections
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/gallery/94-va/519/

SCA projects
http://www.greydragon.org/furniture/tapestries/index.html

I am very happy to be contacted if anyone wants to have a go at painting tapestries. I can be contacted at viscountess@optusnet.com.au

Photos of tapestries follow
Ingerith Ryzka, Easter 2011 Suth Moot
(Margareta Nicholas)