

MODERN TAPESTRY

By

CLIFFORD BARBER

Mr. Clifford Barber designed the Silver Jubilee Tapestry which now hangs in the Guard Chamber at Windsor Castle, in the State Apartments, where its position was specially chosen by our late King, H.M. George V. A full page illustration of this tapestry was presented to readers of the August issue of "The Master Key Magazine" by gracious permission of H.M. Queen Mary, when we also gave a complete textual description of it. Now Mr. Clifford Barber who designed that tapestry for and under the auspices of The Cambridge Tapestry Co., Ltd., Cambridge, England, tells just how a modern tapestry comes into being, which is of interest to all who love fine artistry and craftsmanship or who may be contemplating the creation of tapestry, either for their own establishments or for gifts under their patronage to civic buildings. Some of our captains of industry may even be encouraged to foster an ancient craft that is so well fitted to flourish, by providing a new use for appropriate modern designs of tapestry, which could be hung in their reception halls, many of which are worthy settings for so unusual and glorious an embellishment.-
THE EDITOR.

SINCE the public exhibition of the Silver Jubilee Tapestry in London, and the publication of its photograph in last Month's issue of this magazine, many have expressed surprise that tapestry is being woven in this country to-day, and have asked for details of the work involved in its creation.

The restoration and repairing of existing tapestries, together with the weaving of new panels, began in Cambridge during the Great War. Actually the business was founded by the late Mr. Walter Witter, as a village industry at Ickleford, Herts., in 1900. The work is now carried on by the Cambridge Tapestry Company, at Cambridge, under the direction of Mr. Carr Witter, son of the founder.

Two panels of original design, recently woven by the Company, have attracted considerable attention. One adorns the staircase at Anglesey Abbey, Lord Fairhaven's country house at Lode, while the other is now the property of Her Majesty Queen Mary, and hangs in the Guard Chamber in the State Apartments at Windsor Castle.

This article is an outline of the procedure during the production of panels such as these.

Let us assume that the Company has been commissioned to design and weave a panel of a certain size, and number of warps to the inch. To begin with, experiments are made with small pencil sketches, to try various compositions of the subject given. The happiest idea, suggesting the greatest possibilities in tapestry, is sketched in water-colour, and if approved by the client, we begin collecting data in the form of sketches, and photographs. If, as in the case of the Jubilee panel, aerial views of landscape and buildings are to be woven, special photographs have to be taken by aerial photographers from a particular view-point, ordnance survey maps consulted, close-up ground pictures secured, and colour sketches made of local colour.

As can be imagined, considerable time and patience are required to blend all this material into the "free" parts of the design, and generally a fair amount of artistic licence is essential, especially when one is obliged, for the sake of the composition, to move a building a mile or so out of its position, and still contrive to please those whose pet aversion is topographical inaccuracy! It is interesting to note the enormous advantage the modern designer has over the old-time artist, when drawing bird's-eye views. Modern science brings to his aid the aeroplane and camera, ensuring accuracy. These "shots" from the air are usually amazingly beautiful in the wealth of pattern they reveal, and open up a new and exciting field to a designer.

With the main theme of the design settled, photographs, sketches, and colour notes to hand, work begins on a drawing of the tapestry in miniature, carefully and accurately drawn up. This is then copied faithfully in charcoal on a canvas the full size of the tapestry. The enlarging of the small sketch is a long and laborious task, which must be carried out with great care, particularly where intricate architectural details are involved. The canvas, or cartoon, now shows in line drawings the full scheme of the panel, and at this stage alterations are generally necessary.

Imperfections are revealed that were not apparent in the smaller drawings, and with these corrected, the painting of the panel in oil colours can begin. Apart from the restrictions imposed by the client's own expressed wishes with regard to the colour scheme, the artist is free to paint in whatever colour he pleases. Practically any colour or shade painted can be matched exactly in wools and silks. After many years' experience the Company has collected an enormous range of colours and shades, sufficient to allow a painter plenty of scope in colour variation.

While the artist has so much freedom in his choice of colour, he is very restricted as to how he may paint the cartoon, for this has to be painted exactly as it will be woven. The colour and position of every thread of the tapestry is planned and painted on the cartoon, before the weaving is commenced. It is essential to realize that the cartoon is not a painted picture depending on the skill of the weavers for translation into tapestry terms of wool and silk. The cartoon is definitely a highly technical piece of work, painted in the language of tapestry, and leaving nothing to the weavers' imagination. They are able, therefore, to concentrate all their skill and energy on the difficult task of weaving. The purpose of the cartoon is best described as a clear working drawing in full colour.

Those who see a painted cartoon for the first time, generally comment on its rather aggressive colour in comparison with the woven tapestry. The warp threads running horizontally across the work, being stouter than the weft threads, give a ribbed effect to the finished fabric. Each rib catches, absorbs the light, and casts a pencil line of shadow along the width of the tapestry, both softening the colours, and deepening them at the same time. This is allowed for on the cartoon, and explains its harsh and bright appearance.

The "free" elements of the design, represented in the case of the Jubilee tapestry by the foreground, flanking verdure, and waterfowl, give the greater amount of pleasure during the painting. The broader drawing, more interesting massing of light and shade, and the use of freer colour, compensates one for the tedium caused by the more intricate work demanded, for instance, in buildings. The border of the panel, too, generally gives plenty of scope for interesting pattern in colour and design.

Obviously, the designer needs to be very familiar with weaving technique. In the writer's case, this knowledge has been gained by many years' experience of designing reparations for ancient tapestries. Magnificent specimens from all the famous tapestry looms of the past have been repaired in the workrooms of the Company, and each has added its quota of experience to the writer's knowledge of tapestry technique. The six weavers of the Jubilee Panel gained their experience in the same way, and no finer method of training could be devised. Many tapestry factories of the past relied on outside help for their cartoons. Artists famed in other fields were brought in to design for them, and many technically bad works were produced in this way. At Cambridge, the weavers and designers have worked side by side over many years, gaining experience as a team together. In this way the artist discovers just how much he can put into his work, without overtaxing, or underestimating, the weavers' abilities. The praise earned by the Jubilee Tapestry during its exhibition in London shows how successful the close collaboration of weavers and designer can be.

The work involved in painting occupies a great deal of time, requires careful deliberation, and probably frequent changing of colours that were first thought of as final. This part of the process having been completed, a copy of the entire cartoon is made for the use of the weavers.

The painting is covered with blue transparent tracing cloth, and the design traced through in Indian ink. We now have on the tracing-cloth a black line drawing, indicating to the weavers the exact shape, and position, of every change of colour on the cartoon. This again is another long and tedious

process which must be carried out with great care, as any variation between cartoon and tracing causes the weavers additional anxiety, and delays the weaving.

As all drawing is now completed, it is possible to commence matching the colours of the cartoon in silks and wools. This work is in the hands of the weavers' supervisor (who takes the place of the master-weaver of old), and the artist who assists, and sees that the colours chosen agree with his painting. Only the finest quality materials, absolutely fast to light, are employed. The wools and silks are wound on small wooden bobbins known as *broches*, and patterns taken of each are attached to a chart, enabling the weavers to identify any colour with its position on the cartoon or tracing.

With everything to hand, the tapestry-weavers are ready to begin their work at the loom.

The high-warp loom in use at Cambridge is an extremely simple affair, being nothing more than two rollers held apart, one above the other, in a strong wooden frame, with the warp attached to each, and strained at great tension between them. The early Egyptians wove on looms which were, in principle, exactly the same as this, and all the beautiful fabrics handed down to us from past civilizations were produced by equally simple means.

There are two types of loom, called high warp, and low-warp respectively. On the high-warp loom the warp is held vertically, and is used at Cambridge for all new work. This is the more difficult loom to use, but it gives, in the writer's opinion, a firmer fabric. On the low-warp loom the warp is stretched horizontally, and is almost exclusively used for repair work to existing tapestries at Cambridge.

The warp being stretched vertically on the high-warp loom means that the weavers have to weave the work on its side, gradually making their way from one side of the tapestry to the other. The blue cloth tracing is pinned to the warp with the right hand side of the design at the bottom of the loom. The tracing covers what will be the "face" of the fabric, and the weavers sitting on the other side, see the design through the warp. To them the weaving is backward, and sideways all the time. Behind them stands the cartoon, which they consult continuously in order to understand exactly what the lines on the tracing indicate. At the Gobelin factory in France, the design is inked on the warps, and the weavers use mirrors to enable them to see what is happening on the "face" of the weaving. At Cambridge this method was rejected because the ink was found to soil the silks and wools, while the use of a very detailed tracing gives a better quality fabric altogether. Every other thread of the warp is caught by a cord attached to a rod running the width of the loom above the weavers' heads, and by this means they are able to separate any part of the warp to receive a pass of the broche, loaded with wool or silk. Where different colours meet without mingling, slits are left in the fabric, which are sewn up later. After each colour is used, it is left hanging at the back of the warp until required again. In a short time hundreds of *broches* hang in gaily-coloured profusion, waiting their turn in the making of this mosaic of threads.

Though hundreds of *broches* may be in use, it must be emphasized that they are not all different colours. Most of them will be in duplicate, and the actual number of distinct colours in use will be comparatively few. The richest effects in tapestry being best achieved with few changes of colour.

This brings us to the question of dyes, which is of vital importance, for obviously, the results of the concentrated energy of six weavers over a period of a year or more, cannot be risked by using doubtful dyes.

Therefore the line has always been taken at Cambridge, that the dyeing of the wools and silks should be carried out by specialists, and the work is placed in the competent hands of a firm who devote all their energies to this difficult art.

The work of completing the panel of tapestry will occupy the weavers month after month, and, but for the fact that they love their work, the task would be unbearable in its demands on their patience and skill. They have, too, the thrill of creating a work of art, that will be treasured, and cared for, through many long years. They do not fear the effects of time on their work to any great extent, for they know that it can outlast generation after generation.