The Unicorn Tapestries

Thanks to all the volunteers who make this program happen! If you have specific questions about this write-up, please email Jennifer Klein @ jenniferbklein@gmail.com.

NOTE TO PRESENTERS:
The following are several ideas. You will not have time to do it all, so pick and choose according to your interest and the age of the children. Please bring the following with you to the classroom:

- The large poster of the Unicorn tapestry
- Three Elements of Art posters
- The small swath of material
- Tapestry and Needlepoint book and/or Discovery Box Weaving book
The Big Picture:

**What:** A tapestry is a hand-woven reversible textile usually used as a decoration and characterized by complicated designs. The Unicorn Tapestries are a series of seven which depict the hunt of the mythological unicorn. Our focus for this presentation is the last in the series, *The Unicorn in Captivity.*

**Where:** The exact location of their origin is unknown, although it was probably France or Belgium. They are now hanging in the Cloisters, part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Records from 1680 indicate that they belonged to Francois VI, duke de La Rochefoucauld, but during the French Revolution they were apparently taken from his chateau. At some point after this time, they were used by peasants to protect produce from frost! They were recovered in 1850, purchased by John D. Rockefeller in 1922 and donated to the museum in 1937.

**When:** They date from approximately 1500, which is around the end of the Middle Ages.

**Who:** The name of the artist or artists who designed these tapestries is unknown.

**Life Lessons:**
These are important messages for the students to remember and you can include these ideas as part of your presentation.

- Symbols can tell part of a story.
- Art comes in many forms and one piece of art can be produced by many artists.
- Art passes through many hands before it ends up in a museum. There is a story in the art and the piece of art often has a story.

**Creation of the Tapestry:**
Tapestries are hand-made on looms. The warp threads are held in tension between two beams or rollers. The warp threads are hardly seen in the finished product, and the weft threads carry the color. For the design, a full size drawing, called a cartoon, is used to guide the weaver or weavers. The outlines of the cartoon are traced onto the warp threads. The Unicorn Tapestries must have taken years to complete. The works were commissioned by a patron, probably in celebration of a marriage, and were created by groups of tapestry artists, cartoonists, skilled dyers, and weavers. These tapestries are mostly wool, with some silk and metallic threads. All of the many colors and shades were derived from only three dye plants: madder (reds), weld (yellows), and woad (blues).

**Featured Piece: The Unicorn in Captivity**
The previous tapestries in this series depict the unicorn being hunted and his dead body being brought back to the castle; however, in this tapestry the unicorn is brought back to life. It is in an enclosure, fastened to a pomegranate tree. (What may appear as blood on the unicorn is
actually the juice from a pomegranate.) The unicorn is surrounded by beauty and seems protected.

Literature about the unicorn tapestries describes a variety of interpretations of this story. Many are religious, while others saw the unicorn as a symbol of the bridegroom and/or the new marriage. Whatever the intended meaning was, it is clear that the unicorn was an important symbol during the Middle Ages. Unicorns were believed to have many strange abilities, including the power to heal, and they were widely believed to be real creatures.

The Unicorn Tapestry is described as a millefleurs style because of the background which makes it appear that the figures are placed against a field of flowers that fills the entire background. The first is the only other tapestry that has this millefleurs background; the other five have very realistic woodland and garden settings. This tapestry is enormous, measuring approximately 12 feet by 9 feet.

**Elements of Art:**

Begin with using the Elements of Art posters for discussion.

COLOR:

- Which colors do you see? How does the fact that this is a piece of artwork using string or yarn rather than paint affect the colors used? (One possible answer: not able to blend colors in the way that painters can.)

SHAPE:

- What is the dominant shape that you see? (A circle) What is the symbolism of a circle? (Among other meanings, a circle often indicates unity or wholeness.)

TEXTURE:

- Do you get a sense of texture in these tapestries? Pass around the swath of material so students can get a sense of the texture.

LINE:

- What kinds of lines are depicted? How do the lines affect the overall composition? Do they detract from the dominant circle?

LIGHT:

- Is there a sense of light and shadow?

SPACE:

- Do the tapestries appear three-dimensional?
Discussion Questions/Activities:

1. Play “I Spy”. Perhaps have a student record on the board all of the things that they are able to locate in the tapestry.

2. Explain the term “symbolism”. Go through the items that they listed and explain the symbolism or meaning behind them.

   a. Unicorn – one interpretation is that the unicorn is the groom who is about to get married.
   b. Fence and Chain – the unicorn is constrained but the chain is loose and the fence is low enough to jump over. The unicorn could escape if he wished; however, he appears content to stay where he is.
   c. Pomegranate tree and juice – the red on the unicorn is not blood but juice from the pomegranate tree. The pomegranate tree often symbolized marriage.
   d. Initials – “A” and a backwards “E” – one theory is that those are the initials of Antoinette of Ambroise, wife of Francois La Rochfoucald.
   e. Plants in background – these were wild plants that grew in the area where the tapestries were made. These plants were used for medicine at the time.

3. Discuss magical creatures.

   a. Define the term. (Magical: something or someone that has the power to make impossible things happen by using charms or spells. Creature: a living being, human or animal. Magical creature: an animal or human that has the power to make things happen using charms or spells.)
   b. Ask students: "What makes a magical creature special or unusual?" You can point out that magical creatures often have something unusual about their appearance and may have special powers, such as the ability to fly, grant wishes, or change their looks. Ask students to give examples of other magical creatures they have heard of. Some students might be familiar with mythological creatures, such as Pegasus the winged horse.
   c. Share some information about the powers of the unicorn. The horn is where the unicorn's magic lies. Some stories note that if a pool of water is muddy and tastes bad, the unicorn can dip its horn in the water to make it clear and sweet-tasting again. Other stories claim that a special powder made from the horn of a unicorn could heal sick people. This made people want to catch the unicorn and take its horn. One story tells of a beautiful young woman who could tame a unicorn by sitting quietly in a meadow where it was eating grass. If the unicorn came over and put its head in her lap, she would stroke the unicorn's mane gently until it fell asleep. Then the hunters would come and catch the unicorn and take off its horn. Luckily, unicorns had the power to grow new horns.

4. Talk about how tapestries are made. Show pictures from the Tapestry and Needlepoint book and/or Discovery Box Weaving Book. Ask them what would be difficult about creating a tapestry as opposed to a painting.
5. Since this tapestry is the last in a series which told a story, can you imagine the rest of the story? Here is a good link to learn the real story behind the tapestries. Please use your discretion in telling about the hunt of the unicorn to younger children. http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/medny/albertini2.html

Connections to Today:

- Ask students where they have seen tapestries?
- How are tapestries similar or different to other arts and crafts like painting, knitting, quilting, collage, etc?

Online Sources:

http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/70007568

http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/medny/albertini2.html