

The Bayeux Tapestry, c.1066



The Middle Ages saw cities starting to emerge. Commerce and trade were becoming more important to survival. Women were beginning to be valued for their part in creating textiles for trade. They were forming Guilds that allowed them to pool resources for greater goods and profits and to insure that people were not exploited. Since fabric was utilized in everyday clothing, their weavings were not seen as art.

During this time, there emerged two classes of women who began creating art. Many noble or upper class women were taught embroidery. Many women entered convents where they were educated. Along with reading and writing, they would learn how to create Illuminated Manuscripts. At the time, these two art forms were not called art. The manuscripts were valued by the Catholic Church and used in their mission to convert. The embroidery was often commissioned by the upper class and Church hierarchy to be used in the fabrication of their garments and altar cloths. At the same time the Church was trying to limit the power of women who were serving as abbesses.

“Celebrating the conquest of England by William, Duke of Normandy, this linen canvas was embroidered after the Battle of Hastings on October 14th, 1066, probably in a monastery in the south of England” (Tapisserie de Bayeux). “The only surviving example of Romanesque political embroidery of the eleventh century, the Bayeux Tapestry has been called the ‘most important monument of secular art of the Middle Ages’ (Chadwick, 48).

There seems to be much mystery surrounding the creation of the Bayeux Tapestry. It is believed that Odo, the bishop of Bayeux, commissioned it for the new cathedral. “The Tapestry was certainly made in southern England, presumably by English designers and needlewomen” (Wilson, 212). Given that history credits women with perfecting the skill of embroidery, it’s easy to concur with Mr. Wilson’s presumption that it was made by women. He doesn’t assign a gender to the designers. Yet it would seem logical that the work was created in its entirety by female *Opus Anglicanum* embroiderers.

Part of Wilson’s statement is challenged on the museum’s website. “Most researchers agree on the English origin. However, their opinions differ as to the exact place. For some, the Tapestry was embroidered in St. Augustine’s, Canterbury, for others it was in Winchester, or even Wilton. The German historian Wolfgang Grape defends the Norman hypothesis. He believes that the Tapestry was made in Normandy, very probably in Bayeux. A recent hypothesis by the American historian George Beech states that several clues show that the Bayeux Tapestry was probably made in the French Abbey of St Florent in Saumur” (Tapisserie de Bayeux). It appears that the Tapestry’s origin remains a mystery.

I had the opportunity to view The Bayeux Tapestry in the summer of 2003. From personal experience, I believe that the Tapestry is definitely a work of art.