

With kindest regards.

CHAUCER AND DECORATIVE ART

BY
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CHAUCER, like other poets of his day, enjoyed touching in a detail or putting in a background, and usually gave to both some symbolic significance. These backgrounds were less the creation of untrammelled fancy and more closely based on things seen than is always realised. It is obvious that details like the Squire's embroidered coat and the Prioress's brooch¹ must have had a direct relation with things of everyday life; it is less obvious that his descriptions of decoration on a larger scale had a similar if less close relation.

When Chaucer describes the House of Fame,² that palace of gold and glass might seem far removed from mediæval palaces of stern stone.³

But as I sleep, me mette I was
 Within a temple y-mad of glas;
 In whiche ther were mo images
 Of gold, standing in sondry stages,
 And mo riche tabernacles
 And with perre mo pinacles
 And mo curious portreytures
 And quente maner of figures
 Of olde werke, then I saw ever.

"Then I saw ever"; but Chaucer may very probably have seen miniature palaces of the kind made of crystal and gold and used for the adornment of royal tables, if we may judge by some of those

¹ See Fairholt, *Costume in England*, 1846, p. 466.

² Book I, l. 119; W. W. Skeat, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 7 vols, Oxford, 1894-1897; iii, 4. The "compasses" that he describes as adorning the gate have many parallels in mediæval inventories: Louis of Anjou in 1379-1380 had innumerable pieces of gold work with enamels "assamblés en fourme de compas"; i.e. in panels radiating from a centre; and Charles VI in 1401-1403 had more than fifty tapestries with "compas" of his arms. J. Guiffrey, *Histoire de la tapisserie en France*, p. 24.

³ The Venetian fashion of gilding stone had hardly begun in Chaucer's time; the Ca'd'Oro that had the balls on its pinnacles, the moulding of its cornice, the leaves on its capitals and its heraldic decoration all gilt, was built between 1430 and 1435. T. G. Jackson, *Mediæval Architecture*, ii, p. 247.

described in the inventories of his day. Louis of Anjou, for example, about 1360¹ owned a

tabernacle fait en manière d'un chastel, à double murs cranelez, et a en y-celui, ès premiers murs, II portes bateilleresses et II tournelles de cristal. Et ès secons murs a IIII tournelles, entre lesquelles a un ymage de nostre dame tenant son filz. . . .

Chaucer's palace, it is true, had figures of Venus, Cupid and Vulcan ; but may we not find a certain parallel in a chalcedony vessel for sweet-meats with twelve unnamed personages on the foot and a crowned and winged goddess bearing a bow and sceptre on the lid, that is described in an inventory of the treasures of Charles the Bold ?²

When he goes on to describe the House of Fame in greater detail³ the parallel becomes even closer.

And eek in ech of the pinacles
Weren sondry habitacles
In whiche stoden, all withoute
Ful the castel, al aboute—
Of alle maner of ministrales,
And gestiours that tellen tales
Both of weeping and of game,
Of al that longeth unto Fame. . .

Just such a palace, wrought not in glass but in silver gilt, is described as adorning a piece of plate that likewise belonged to Louis of Anjou, about 1360 :⁴

Un trépié, d'argent doré, dont les jambes sont faites de maçonnerie en manière de piller et sont esmailliez de vert et d'azur, et en chascun piler a un homme dont l'un joue de la vièle, l'autre de la guiterne et l'autre de la cornemuse. . . .

Similar elaborate palaces of gilded pinnacles, with roofs and wind-vanes, and musicians fiddling and trumpeting behind the parapet, frame some of the illustrations of the Romance of Alexander in the splendid manuscript written in 1344 ;⁵ the link between goldsmith's work and literature is complete.

In other of Chaucer's descriptions of decorative schemes the

¹ L. de Laborde. *Notice des émaux exposés dans les galeries du Musée du Louvre*, 2nd part, Documents et glossaire, Paris, 1853, p. 2. A golden cup of similar type is described in his inventory of 1379-1380 ; H. Moranvillé, *Inventaire de l'orfèvrerie et des joyaux de Louis I duc d'Anjou*, Paris, 1906, p. 74.

² Laborde, II, p. 33.

³ Book III, l. 1193 ; Skeat, iii, 36.

⁴ Laborde, *op. cit.* p. 13.

⁵ MS. Bodleian 264.

obvious parallels are still with gold-work. In the *Book of the Duchess* he describes a room : ¹

And sooth to seyn, my chambre was
 Ful wel depeynted, and with glas
 Were al the windowes wel y-glased . . .
 For hoolly al the storie of Troy
 Was in the glasing y-wrought thus,
 Of Ector and king Priamus,
 Of Achilles and Lamedon
 Of Medea and of Jason,
 Of Paris, Eleyne and Lavyne.



Painted windows were not unknown in French castles of Chaucer's time,² but the subject Chaucer describes cannot in the light of the surviving evidence be paralleled on domestic glass³ before the fifteenth century. It was, however, found often enough adorning enamelled goldwork ; and sometimes the inventory-maker describes such enamels as being " de plusieurs couleurs en manière de voirrières."⁴ A great silver dish belonging to Louis of Anjou⁵ was enamelled with figures of Hercules, Jason, Antenor, Troilus, Diomedes, Agamemnon, Patroclus, Telamon, Menelaus, Pentheseila, Ulysses, Hector, Achilles, Paris, Æneas and Priam, with a medallion showing Priam, Hector, Andromache and Polyxena in the middle ; and a silver-gilt flask⁶ was enamelled with Paris, Hercules, Ulysses, Troilus, Hector and Achilles. Nor were such subjects confined to goldwork or to France ; Italian ivory caskets of about 1400 in the Victoria and Albert Museum are carved with the stories of Paris and of Jason.

Whatever may have been Chaucer's inspiration for these windows with the story of Troy, there is no doubt of the actuality of the wall decoration that he depicts in the same room : ⁷

And alle the walles with colours fyne
 Were peynted, bothe text and glose,
 [Of] al the Romaunce of the Rose.

In 1388 Philippe le Hardi had a tapestry " ouvré d'or à l'histoire

¹ Line 320. Skeat, i, 288.

² The Count of Artois was depicted in a window of the Château de Beuvry in 1324 ; and Jean de Berri set painted glass in his Manor of Bicêtre. C. Enlart, *Manuel d'archéologie française*, Deuxième partie, Architecture Civile, 2nd edn., Paris, 1929, p. 143.

³ The earliest known example of a literary theme in *civil* glass is a representation of a scene from the Roman de Tristan in a window from Jacques Cœur's house now in the Museum of Bourges. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁴ Laborde, II, 295.

⁵ In 1379-1380, Moranvillé, p. 481.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

⁷ Line 331.

du Roman de la Rose";¹ and in 1416 Jean de Berry had another.² The "Dieu d'Amour" that figures in it appears on a tapestry belonging to Francesco Gonzaga IV of Mantua in 1406³ and on a late fourteenth-century wall painting in the Castle of Avio,⁴ as well as on many lesser objects.⁵

In the *Squire's Tale* Canace's mew for the wounded hawk to rest in⁶ reminds us in its decoration of representations of other birds mobbing the owl, such as are found carved on misericords at Ely, Gloucester, Norwich and Beverley.⁷

And al with-oute, the mew is peynted grene,
In which were peynted alle thise false foules
As beth thise tidifs, terceletes and oules,
Right for despyt were peynted hem bisyde,
And pyes, on hem for to cry and chyde.

The Romaunt of the Rose, in its descriptions of the paintings on the walls of the Garden of the Rose, is merely a translation; the descriptions of the lists of Theseus in the *Knight's Tale* owe much to Boccaccio's *Teseide* and Statius' *Thebaid*, but something also to the decorative art of Chaucer's day. In the oratory of Venus⁸

. . . alle the circumstances
Of Love, which that I rekne and rekne shall
By ordre weren peynted on the wal—

like the "personages d'ommes et de femmes, et a plusieurs escriptures d'amours en rolleaux" that adorned Philippe le Bon's set of tapestries called "la chambre de la Plaiderie d'Amours,"⁹ and all the lovers that are carved on the ivories of the time.¹⁰ For comparison with the "statue of Venus glorious for to see," we have only the bare record of a tapestry with the "Déesse d'Amours" belonging to Charles VI in 1420,¹¹ and the description of the enamels on two dishes that belonged to Louis of Anjou.¹²

¹ Dehaisnes, *Histoire de l'art dans les Flandres*, p. 346.

² J. Guiffrey, *La Tapisserie*, ii, p. 208.

³ Muntz, *Histoire de la Tapisserie en Italie*, p. 77.

⁴ A. Moressi, Una Camera d'Amore nel Castello di Avio, in *Festschrift für Julius Schlosser*, ed. A. Weixlgärtner and L. Planiscig, Vienna, 1927, p. 99.

⁵ See R. Koechlin, *Les ivoires gothiques français*, i, p. 400.

⁶ Line 645; Skeat, iv, 479.

⁷ F. Bond, *Wood Carvings in English Churches*, i, Misericords, Oxford, 1920

p. 47.

⁸ Line 1918. Skeat, iv, 55.

⁹ Pinchart, *Histoire de la tapisserie dans les Flandres*, p. 23.

¹⁰ Examples in Victoria and Albert Museum; and see R. Koechlin, *Les ivoires gothiques français*, i, pp. 383, 479. Cf. the many "donoiments" recorded in the inventory of Louis of Anjou (Moranvillé, pp. lxi-lxviii).

¹¹ Guiffrey, *op. cit.*, 67.

¹² Moranvillé, p. 486. Cupid was enamelled green.

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The description of the decorations of the Temple of Mars begins with a forest scene, such as was common enough on the walls and hangings of mediæval castles ;¹ but Chaucer ravages it and makes it desolate to give it poetic significance.

First on the wal was peynted a foreste
In which ther dwelleth neither man ne beste
With knotty knarry bareyn treës olde
Of stubbes sharpe and hidous to biholde.
In which ther ran a rumbel and a swough,
As though a storm sholde bresten every bough.²

The description of the temple of Mars is for the most part taken from Statius ; but towards the end³ the Martian trades appear :

The barber, the bocher, and the smith
That forgeth sharpe swerdes on his stith,

like the artisans and tradesmen that are represented on the fifteenth-century frescoes in the courtyard of the castle of Issogne in the Valley of Aosta. The description of the paintings of warfare and the slaughter of great men recalls not only paintings in the Italian castles of Avio, Treviso and Angera, that were in existence in Chaucer's day, but also a set of paintings in London that he must certainly have known : the decoration of the Painted Chamber at Westminster, on the walls of which we are told " all the warlike pictures of the whole Bible are painted with ineffable skill." ⁴

There have been few periods of history in which the links between literature and decorative art were closer than in the fourteenth century. The transference of themes from Romance to tapestries, embroideries, goldsmith's work and ivories is a commonplace of artistic history ; but in return certain poets—and Chaucer most of all—took themes from the decorative arts of their day and made them a part of their verse.

¹ Clémence of Hungary in 1328 had eight tapestries " a ymages et à arbres de la devise d'une chasse " (Guiffrey, p. 25), and Valentine de Milan and her husband in 1408 a set of hangings " de satin vermeil nommée la chambre au parc." F. M. Graves, *Deux inventaires de la maison d'Orléans*, p. 166.

² Line 1975. Skeat, iv, 57.

³ Line 2025.

⁴ So described by the friars Simon and Hugh, who visited it in 1322. See W. R. Lethaby, " The Painted Chamber," in *Burlington Magazine*, vii, 1905, p. 263.

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