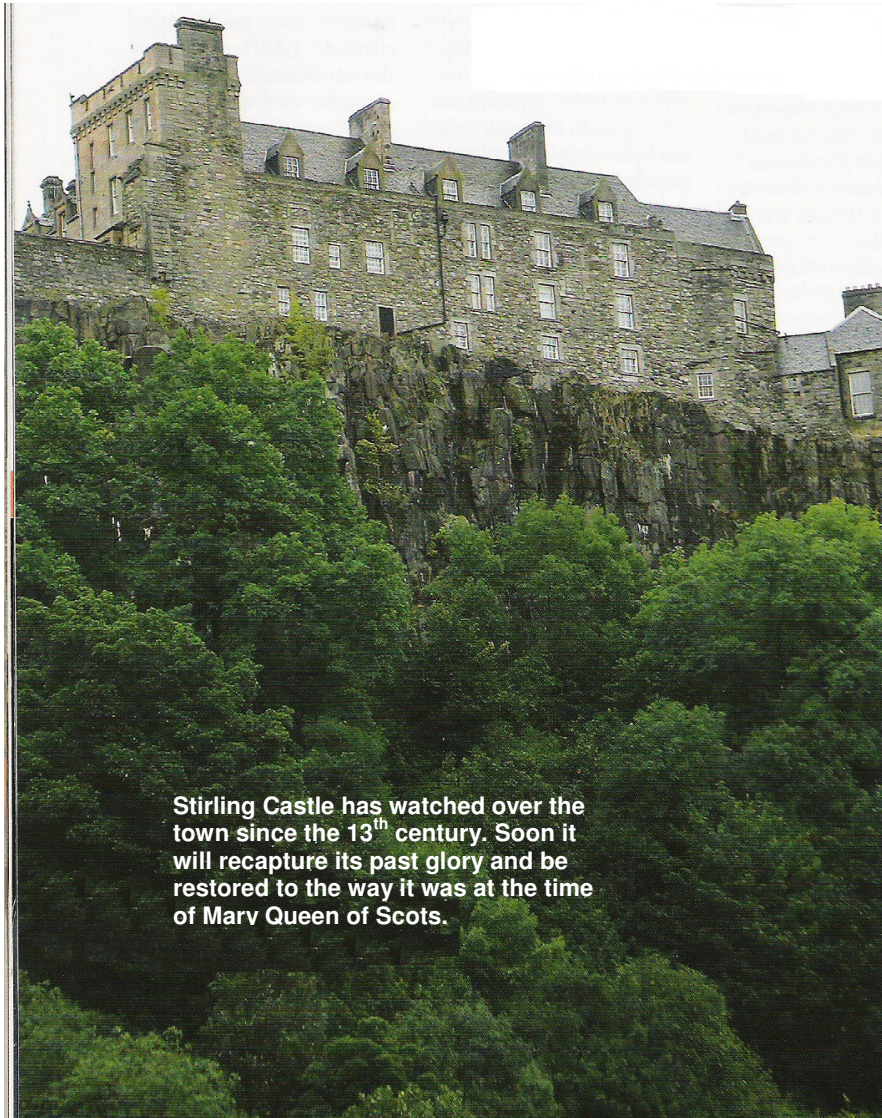


The Unicorn Reincarnated

Text and photos Agneta Gustavsson (original article from the Swedish journal *Tidskriften Hemslöjden* 06/2)

A fascinating tapestry project is underway in Scotland. In a set of seven large tapestries, weavers are retelling the ancient legend as told in The Hunt of the Unicorn, in which the unicorn is hunted down, killed and finally reborn. Originally created more than 500 years ago in the area of Belgium known as Flanders, the set is now being recreated in Scotland and England.



Stirling Castle has watched over the town since the 13th century. Soon it will recapture its past glory and be restored to the way it was at the time of Mary Queen of Scots.

In a room at Stirling Castle in Scotland three women sit shoulder to shoulder, each concentrating on her own part of a large weaving, 3.5 meters wide. The only sounds are the tapping of the tapestry bobbin packing the weft threads against one another, a rustle when one of them touches the paper cartoon on which is drawn a highly detailed version of the original tapestry, or a sigh when the weavers take a brief break from their task, sit up straight and lean away from the loom to see what they have been working on. Does the hunter's cap look like the one in the original? Does it work to use some yellow in the leaves to create a shiny effect?

On the wall behind the weavers is a large representation of the tapestry they are working on, the sixth in the set of seven. In it, the hunters return home with the dead unicorn. The unicorn's sought-after, magical horn has been sawn off and will be presented to the lord of the manor and his lady.

In much the same manner, another team is working in a tapestry studio at West Dean College in Chichester in Southern England. There, work is underway on the second tapestry in the set. The first and seventh tapestries are already finished and are hanging in the great hall at Stirling Castle. By 2013, all seven tapestries will be finished.



The project team consists of an international group of weavers, recruited to recreate “The Hunt of the Unicorn.” Cecilia Blomberg (nearest the camera) from Sweden and Hilary Green from Australia are two of the team members.

“We work exactly the way weavers did in 1495, when work was started on the first in the set somewhere in Flanders,” according to Cecilia Blomberg.

She is a Swede but has lived in the U.S. outside of Seattle for 27 years, working as a textile artist and tapestry weaver. In mid-2005, she relocated to the medieval town of Stirling, Scotland. She opted to exchange a self-employed artist’s freedom for a tightly scheduled work life.



Managing all of the details requires complete concentration. The only sound to be heard is the tapping of the bobbin as it packs the yarns.

Disciplined Weaving

Every morning, Cecilia hikes up to the dark castle which overlooks Stirling from a high, steep ridge. After saying good morning to the guard at the gate, nodding to the castle ghost and passing through three courtyards, she reaches the tapestry studio, where she takes a seat beside her fellow weavers, Louise and Hilary.

Ahead is an eight-hour day with a short break for lunch.

The weavers work in front of the public. Visitors are welcome in the studio, and special guides relate the history of the unicorn and explain the weaving process. The most common question, according to Cecilia: “Everyone wonders why we are weaving sideways instead of from the bottom up. Children often ask why the unicorn was killed.”

From Military Garrison back to Renaissance Castle

A number of Scotland's rulers have lived at Stirling Castle. The coronation of Mary Stuart took place there. A statue of Scotland's most famous freedom fighter, Robert the Bruce, stands in front of the castle walls, looking out over the green plain. Through the centuries, the castle has experienced periods of greatness and others of near destruction.

"For many years it was used as a military headquarters," Cecilia told me as we walked around the castle. "Much was changed: high-ceilinged rooms were divided into an upper and a lower floor, doors were moved or covered over, and much was changed without much thought about eventual restoration."

For the past few years, a major renovation project has been underway. Stirling Castle will be restored to the renaissance castle it was in 1540s, a bright epoch in the castle's history. And that is where the new tapestries enter the picture.

"There are a number of documents which show that the walls used to be covered with tapestries," explains Peter Buchanan, an architect with Historic Scotland which is responsible for the operation of many of the castles in Scotland.

"During that time, there were more than 100 woven tapestries at Stirling Castle. Several of them had the unicorn as a motif, and that is why we have chosen to recreate the well-known Hunt of the Unicorn series, even if they specifically never hung at Stirling Castle.

As for the cost of the project, Peter says that it is supported by several foundations. A wealthy Scottish-American woman has also donated money so that the tapestries will become a reality. He wouldn't reveal an exact figure for the total cost.

"In any case, it's not the yarns which are the most costly," he says. "It's the wages."

A quick calculation reveals that wages alone will exceed 20 million crowns (about 1.4 million GBP). This is a huge undertaking, both economically and in terms of time, which can explain why some deviations from the medieval tapestries have been made.

The tapestries will be ten percent smaller than the originals, in part so that they can be accommodated in the space between the ceiling and the wooden panels in the Queen's Hall where they will ultimately be hung. Additionally, in the interest of the project schedule, there are four warp threads per centimeter versus seven in the originals.

105 different shades

The colors in the new tapestry are much brighter and more intensive than those in the original. This is due to the fact that the project leaders used the back side of the old tapestry as a benchmark. On the back the yarns had not faded but were instead almost completely retained the original colors. In the tapestry being woven at Stirling Castle, 105 separate shades are used. In order to recreate these shades exactly, the team leaders chose not to use vegetable pigments to

dye the yarns, “in part because the dying process would be so time-consuming and involved, in part because we wanted to be sure that the colors would be preserved for future generations,” according to Cecilia.

Once a week, weaving is interrupted so that the tapestry can be measured. Hilary and Cecilia measure the average height of the tapestry’s uneven upper edge. In a typical week, the tapestry grows by 2.4 centimeters.

This time, all went well. Cecilia is finished with the hunter’s cap and will begin work on the upper part of his jacket. Hilary continues with foliage and all the flowers. In July 2007, if all goes according to plan, the tapestry will be cut down from the loom. Not until then will it be possible to see the 11 square meter piece in its entirety. Is that exciting?

“Yes,” Cecilia says. “Then we’ll have a grand party!”

The Unicorn Set

No one knows exactly when The Hunt of the Unicorn was woven, but judging from how people represented in the weavings are dressed, the date of the seven tapestries has been placed between 1495 and 1505. It is also not known who commissioned them but the initials AE woven into each tapestry give some clue as to the identity of the original owner.

The tapestries were probably woven in Flanders but came then to France, only to disappear until after the French revolution. They were discovered on a farm in France in the 1850s.

The set was later purchased by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. who, in 1937 donated them to the Metropolitan Museum in New York. They are on display in the museums department for medieval art, The Cloisters.

The unicorn is an imaginary creature, heavy with symbolism, and represents purity, benevolence and virtue. It is traditionally shown on the Scottish kings’ coat of arms.