

# EN TAPESTRY — Tristram and Morgain's Shield

*Tapestry woven in Brussels, c. 1620-1630. Wool, silk, silver and gilt-metal wrapped thread, 345 x 402 cm. Inscriptions TRISTRAM, ORGAIN on the garments of the main figures. Brussels town mark on the bottom selvage, weaver's monogram on the right lateral selvage. Gift of the Jef Dillen family 1934. Musée la Ville de Bruxelles – Maison du Roi n° E 1934/1.*

This woven wall hanging is part of a series known as *The Brussels Tristan Tapestries* whose seven pieces graced for several centuries the castles and palaces of the Italo-Austrian aristocratic house of Collalto. In the early 1930s, the tapestries were first separated. At that time, a member of the Friends of the Musée Communal acquired the Tristram and Morgan panel and donated it to the museum. After World War II, the rest of the set entered the collection of the Palais d'Egmont, property of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where it now hangs.

Taken together, the *Brussels Tristan Tapestries* illustrate the time-honored tale of the myth of Tristan in a version colored by humanist concepts and the lingering Renaissance nostalgia for the age of chivalry. This unique re-interpretation offers the visualization of the love of Tristan and Iseult, grown into legend since the twelfth century, as the catalyst for the hero's progress towards his induction into the ultimate knighthood, the confraternity of King Arthur's Round Table.

The "Tristram and Morgain's Shield" tapestry is particularly cogent to the chivalric theme. Tristram, on his way to a tournament proclaimed by King Arthur, is given hospitality by Arthur's sister, Morgan the Fay. As the hero prepares to take his

leave, his hostess honors him with a prestigious gift to be worn at the royal tournament: a shield formerly borne by her father, Utherpendragon. This is, in fact, a vengeful trap Morgan contrived to shame the King by exposing publicly the attachment Queen Guenevere shares with the knight Lancelot who had spurned the love of the enchantress.

The Musée de la Ville panel testifies to the quality of the *Brussels Tristan Tapestries* as artifacts. Its well-preserved state, vivid colors and high proportion of precious threads allow the viewer to appreciate the original richness of the weaving. It shares with the other tapestries of the series the same airy compositional scheme and narrative formula of progressively receding ancillary scenes which complete the main narrative of the foreground. This figurative technique prevailed through the sixteenth century, and in the woven designs of Michiel Coxcie in particular.

Yet we know from the recent identification of the other weaver of the Brussels Tristan series, Paulus van Nieuwenhove, that the execution of the cartoons took place around the second decade of the seventeenth century. The tapestry industry was then recovering from the devastating wars of the previous century and reproductions after old masters' series were in demand as cost-saving in conception and less time-consuming in production. Several such sets came out of Nieuwenhove's workshop. However, there were no ready cycle of Tristan models circulating, and the series was "invented"; in fact, "Tristram and Morgain's Shield" is the only fully

developed illustration of this particular episode in the entire Tristan iconography. The style is deliberately archaizing and eclectic, with indications of Late Mannerist and early Baroque influences.

Research goes on but no trace has yet surfaced of the putative patron, of the designer, the cartoonist or even of a second edition.

The *Brussels Tristan Tapestries* have a further claim to uniqueness: they appear to be the only surviving serial rendering of the Tristan myth produced on the loom.

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**The weaver's monogram (not identified)**

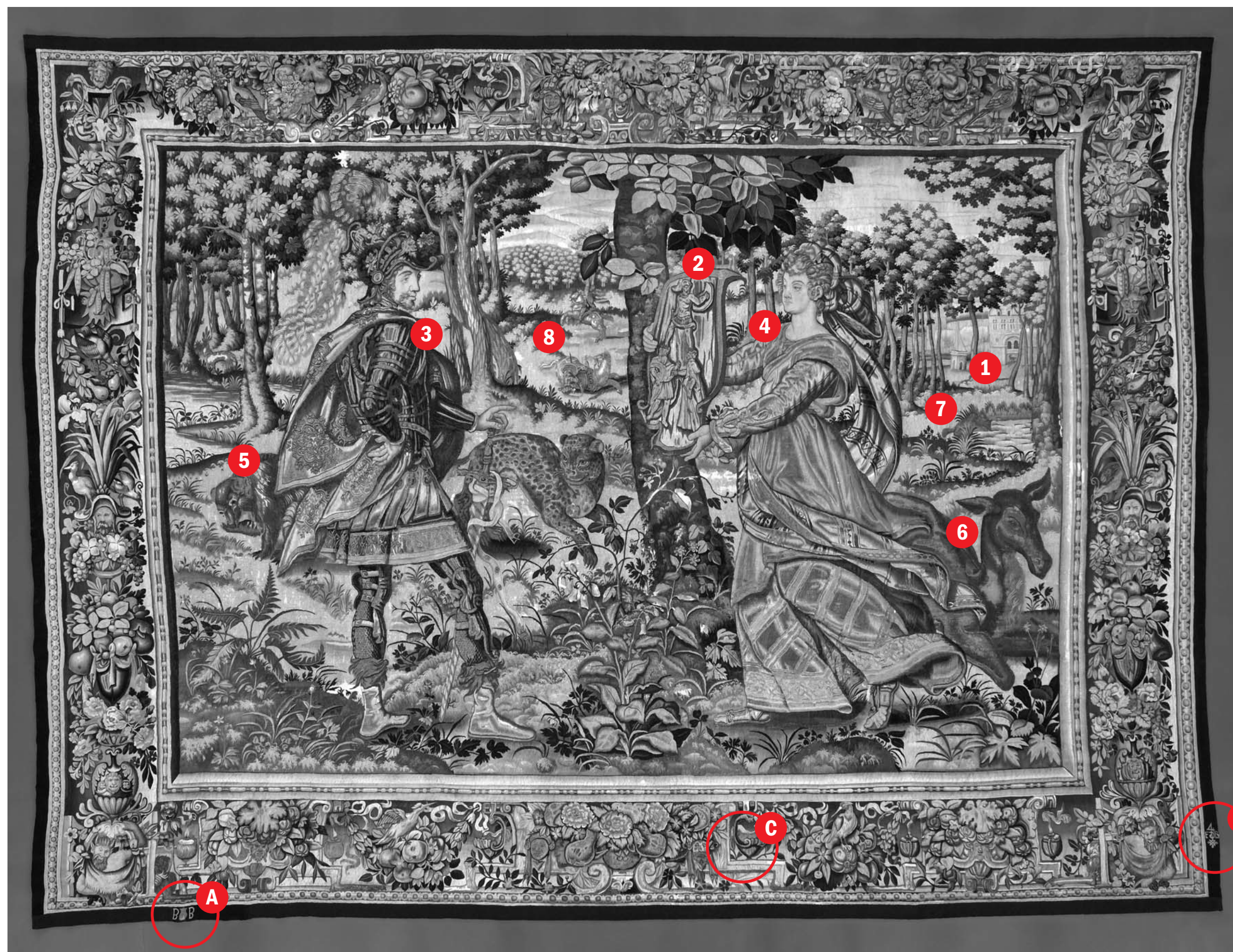


**State Dining Room in the Palais d'Egmont, with the rest of the set of the Brussels Tristan Tapestries**

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**The Brussels Town mark**



1

The action takes place in the parkland adjoining an opulent dwelling seen through the trees on the upper right **1**. This is Morgan's "modern" palace, with her ancestral stronghold looming in the background. Two trophies hung on the trees bear witness to the successful defense of the site.

2

The shield dominates the center of the tapestry. Entirely gilt, tooled in relief, it first attracts the eye by its luxury before one notices its unconventional charge: a warrior armed à l'antique straddling defiantly the crowned heads of a royal couple.

3

4

On either side of the shield, the protagonists of the main scene are identified by inscriptions embroidered in gold letters on their garments. Morgan (misnamed Orgain for Morgain) comes running, proffering her gift to Tristram who halted suddenly. Her imperious air, her outstretched arms and the sweeping movement of her skirts and scarf translate her eagerness, in contrast with the knight's immobility, his perplexed expression, and the questioning index he points at the shield. The unbuckled sword with the sheathed point resting on the ground and the baldric wrapped around the guard hints at the abnormality of the situation.

5

6

7

Animals share in the interaction. By Tristram's side **5**, the bear's sly glance and the intense stare of the fleeing leopard reflect the hero's suspicion. The doe resting behind Morgan **6** directs at the viewer a querying eye. Below Morgan's abode, on the side of a pond **7**, a red fox lunges to catch a swan whose flapping wings register danger.

8

Slightly off the upper center of the pictorial field, the vista opens to a clearing where a battle was waged between two mounted knights. One hit the ground with his head, his feet still in the stirrups, and he now lies caught over his fallen horse, which is striving to get up. This is Huneson, Morgan's jealous champion, who had followed Tristram to challenge him. The victor is riding off on his rearing steed, his cape and the panache of his helm floating in the wind.

A

Town mark of Brussels: a red shield between two letters B, for Brussels in Brabant.

B

Weaver's monogram, unidentified so far: FDB.

C

Borders  
As with the other six panels, the borders *en trompe-l'oeil* imitate a carved wooden frame, decorated in its wide center with arrangements of flowers, fruit, birds, vases,

human faces, scrolled ironwork and cassolettes sending up wisps of incense. They are primarily decorative and were woven after models of mid-sixteenth century borders.