Text and Tapestry: "The Lady and the Unicorn," Christine de Pizan and the le Vistes

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Abstract
The luminous, famous and enigmatic The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries are timeless objects at the center of heated scholarly discussion. There are six tapestries, created circa 1480-1500 (figures 1 – 6), and were commissioned by the le Viste family of Lyon, whose heraldic arms appear in each tapestry. This paper seeks to connect the tapestries conceptually to contemporary courtly, feminine ideals, the image of woman in late fifteenth-century Paris, and most importantly to Christine de Pizan's writings, particularly City of Ladies and The Treasury of the City of Ladies, both written in 1405. Through her texts, Christine de Pizan (1363 – 1434) created a noble, dignified image of women that may have influenced the way viewers were intended to perceive The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries. While recent scholarly studies have connected the tapestries to contemporary texts, there has not been a discussion regarding Christine de Pizan’s influential writings, their surrounding discourse, or the image of a woman as the visual embodiment of the le Viste family in connection to the tapestries. Specific passages in Christine’s texts resemble motifs, objects, and underlying messages in The Lady and the Unicorn. While Christine’s works may not have been the direct inspiration for the tapestries, both are a part of the visual and textual make-up of the abstracted feminine ideals that were circulating in Paris and France at large in the fifteenth century. The Lady and the Unicorn may also have had a didactic purpose similar to Christine’s Treasury of the City of Ladies, displaying for the le Viste daughters through a visual medium the attributes of the ideal maiden. Exploring the cultural context in which The Lady and the Unicorn was created, specifically as it relates to women in society, the upper class, expectations for young maidens, visual and written moral messages for women and their artistic manifestations provides a new understanding of these exceptional tapestries.

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Look at the Unicorns! The is central part of one of the six famous tapestries, collectively known as The Lady and the Unicorn (or The Maiden and the Unicorn, La Dame à la licorne in French). The unicorn kneels on the ground, with his front legs in the lady's lap, from which he gazes at his reflection in the mirror. The lion on the left holds up a pennant. They were apparently commissioned by Jean Le Viste, the nobleman at the court of King Charles VII, and could be made between 1460s and 1490s. The use of the mirror as a tool of understanding and reason follows the same tradition as in the works of Christine de Pizan, with the only difference that the tools does ‘work’ here.