

# What is tapestry?

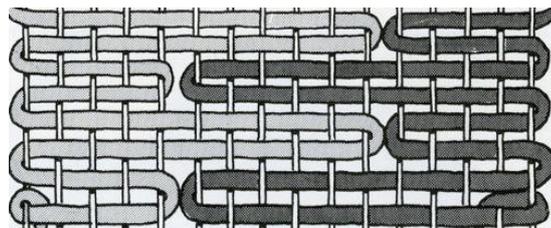
Tapestry is one of the oldest forms of woven textiles. The techniques used have remained the same for centuries. Remnants of tapestries woven in ancient Egypt have been dated as far back as 3000BC.

In the Middle Ages master weavers' studios designed and wove great, colourful tapestries for wealthy clients. In the Renaissance artists such as Raphael were commissioned to produce cartoons for studios to copy, giving weavers less freedom of interpretation. Surviving tapestries from these times can still be seen, though they sometimes look rather dull and predominantly beige, blue and red. That's because vibrant yellows, greens, purples and browns have disappeared as the dyes used have faded away.

Today, tapestry weaving is dominated by individual weavers producing their own designs, though a few studios where large tapestries are woven from artists' cartoons still survive. Traditional fibres (wool, silk and linen) continue to be used, together with cotton and other more modern materials.

## What defines a tapestry?

- Tapestries are *hand* woven on a loom. Tapestry looms are either vertical (*high warp*) or horizontal (*low warp*).
- The design is formed by the weft (horizontal) threads, which are tightly packed to cover the warp (vertical) threads. The warp threads are normally completely covered so play no part in the design. This is known as '*weft facing*'.
- Each colour of weft is worked only in its own section of the design, so there are many different wefts on the go at any one time. This is known as '*discontinuous weft*' (see diagram). Unlike other forms of weaving, it is rare for the weft to run across the entire width of the piece.
- Tapestries are usually made to hang on a wall (though rugs, cushion covers and three-dimensional installations can also be made).



## What's not tapestry?

Fine tapestries take a long time to weave, so have long been rare and expensive. Perhaps because of this, the term 'tapestry' has been purloined by other techniques to produce textiles and wall hangings, often resembling tapestry but at a much lower cost. Common culprits are:

	What it is:
<b>'Tapestry' chair-backs, screens, cushions etc., including those sold in kit form</b>	Needlepoint, canvas-work, woolwork (a design is inked onto canvas or a similar fabric, then stitched with a needle to create the patterns and pictures)
<b>The 11<sup>th</sup> Century Bayeux 'Tapestry', The Quaker 'Tapestry' (completed 1989) and The Great 'Tapestry' of Scotland (completed in 2013)</b>	All of these are embroidered wall-hangings
<b>Grayson Perry's Walthamstow 'Tapestry' and the "The Vanity of Small Differences" series of six 'tapestries'</b>	Computer-controlled jacquard weaving (the design is formed by intricately-coloured warp AND weft threads)
<b>Large-scale 'tapestry' wall hangings and installations produced by various fibre-artists</b>	Can be a mix of any/all of (non-tapestry) weaving, threading, knotting, felting and embroidery

## How to recognise a tapestry

On any tapestry you'll see characteristic *lines of ridges* where the weft threads go over the warp threads. This tells you it's a genuine woven tapestry. During weaving, and sometimes when completed and hung, these lines of ridges run *vertically* from the top to the bottom of the tapestry.

But the lines of ridges may run *horizontally*. This is because tapestries, especially large ones, are often woven so that the warps will be horizontal when hung. This distributes the weight of the tapestry better and prevents the wefts sliding down the warps with time (as happened with the Christ in Glory tapestry at Coventry Cathedral). When hung like this, the design has to be woven sideways on.

## Where to see tapestries in Britain

Below is a selection of places where tapestries can be seen – but there are many others.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London	Forde Abbey, Dorset
The British Library, London	Montacute House, Somerset
Hampton Court Palace, Surrey	Tyntesfield House, Somerset
William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow	Cotehele, Cornwall
Osterley House, Middlesex	Powis Castle
Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester	Anglesey Abbey
Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire	National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery	Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh
Coventry Cathedral	Glasgow Cathedral
Tapestry Studio at West Dean College, Chichester	The Burrell Collection, Glasgow
Knole House, Kent	Falkland Palace, Cupar
Blickling Hall, Norfolk	Stirling Castle (where there are seven newly-woven 'Unicorn' tapestries based on originals produced in the early 1500s)

In addition, artist weavers regularly hold their own exhibitions and open studios – see the News and Events section of the British Tapestry Group (BTG) website [www.thebritishtapestrygroup.co.uk](http://www.thebritishtapestrygroup.co.uk) for a current list of what's going on across the country.

## Want to find out more or try your hand at tapestry weaving?

The BTG website is a good place to start. As well as information about exhibitions and open studios, the Showcase section contains a gallery of members' work, and there is also a list of members who offer workshops or one to one tuition.

Tapestry study days and workshops are held from time to time at museums and art galleries across the country.

Local Guilds of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers may also have sessions on tapestry weaving. There are many such Guilds in the UK - a list of them can be found at [www.wsd.org.uk](http://www.wsd.org.uk).