● The Holy family with Saint John the Baptist - The Holy family - Jesus Christ and his parents - is quoted as an example by the Church for all the Christian families. In the religious iconography, she can be accompanied with John the Baptist. Here, the scene takes place inside with an opening on a wooded scenery, both children being held by Mary.

● The Flight into Egypt - Matthew is the only one to evoke this episode (Matthew 2, 13) often enriched by apocryphal texts. But here, the suggested interpretation is close to the narrative of the Gospel and full of sobriety and simplicity. The accent is put on the figures which appear almost full length of the tapestry. Slightly detached on the left the group Mary-Jesus-Joseph obviously guided by the Holy Spirit is about to cross a bridge, a symbol of the quest towards the exile.

5 - The Dormition (Death) of the Virgin (XVth century) 
(194 cm x 538 cm) - Unknown French workshop

The original dimensions of this tapestry were probably more important (a pillar is cut on left edge, and also the feet of the figures in the foreground, the ceiling and the sky of the bed). It was intended to be hung in the choir and doubtlessly included in a tapestry telling all the Virgin's life. This episode is never quoted in the New Testament but only in apocryphal texts or oral traditions not contained in the canonical texts and among these, two legendary customs. According to the first one, Mary would have followed John to Ephesus where she would have been buried (the Virgin’s chapel still exists in Ephesus); according to the second one, she would have been buried in Jerusalem where a basilica was built on its presumed grave.

For the Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Churches the Dormition includes the death of the Theotokos (=Mary, the mother of Jesus, literally translated as God-bearer) and her bodily resurrection before being taken up into heaven, the Assumption, while for the Western Catholics, it concerns only her death. However, according to the Transitus Mariae, the most important apocryphal text for this iconography, the death of the Virgin is divided into four phases: Dormition, Funeral, Assumption and Coronation.

So, the Dormition follows up the coming of the Archangel Gabriel which announces to Mary her close death. He entrusts her a palm which will have to be worn by John the Apostle during his burial. After three days of prayer, the Virgin hands its soul to her Son and then the apostles are miraculously transported to be at her side when she died. On this tapestry, we can see the Virgin Mary in her house lying on her deathbed surrounded by nine apostles while the three last ones seem to have just arrived following the intervention of the angel.

In the XVth century, prevails the idea of the assumption of the dead (prayer pronounced around the coffin after the Requiem Mass) an idea which prevails here: Saint Peter, dressed in the stole crossed on his alb, splashes Mary's body of holy water and recites the last prayers. Saint John with the celestial palm and the third apostle holds the censer.

The picture which served as a model for the cartoon of this piece is from a Book of Hours for the use of Rome dated 1498 fourteen ninety-eight.

4 - The life of the Virgin (XVth century) 150 cm x 240 cm each

Hanging in 8 parts (only 7 parts shown) – Aubusson Factory

Note the presence of Joseph in almost all the represented scenes which is not always in compliance with the canonical Gospels.

● Wedding of the Virgin - As most of the Marian themes, the Wedding of the Virgin is not quoted in the canonical Gospels but only in apocryphal texts or according to the Golden Legend. This scene represents the wedding ceremony of the Virgin, then fourteen-year-old, the high priest blessing the future couple framed on the background by two bunches of flowers which could be here a reference to the test undergone by Joseph, the only one whose stick gave flowers what entitled him to wed the Virgin.

● The Annunciation - Evoked in the Gospel of Luke (1, 26-38), it is one of the most oldest iconographic representations of the New Testament (IVth century): "And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; [...] And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary; for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. [...] Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: [...]". The apocryphal texts, widely spread by the Golden Legend of Jacques de Voragine in the thirteenth century, have then enriched the theme of numerous details. The Annunciation of this hanging, dated seventeenth century, turns back on the other hand to the evangelic text. The scene takes place in Mary's bedroom as is the tradition and the chosen moment is the arrival of the Archangel Gabriel, holding the lily flower, a symbol of purity and virginity. This sudden apparition of the archangel is here sharply marked by the movement of the folds of the clothes and by that of wings. Mary placed on the left, holds an opened book, doubtless a reference to the prediction of Isaiah: "well, the girl will become pregnant, she will give birth to a son and she will give him Emmanuel's name" (Isaiah 7, 14). Anticipating a little the words of the Archangel Gabriel told in Luc's Gospel, a dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit crowns the scene.

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On a background of wooded and in bloom landscape with small houses in the distance, appears in a radiant thick cloud the crowned Virgin holding the infant Jesus in her arms. Her feet are resting on a crescent of the moon that two angels support; two others are holding the crown. Two shepherds armed with their crook are attending the apparition and show their surprise and their devotion. The left one with a knee on the ground joins his hands while his cap is lying on the ground. The right one, still standing up, protects his eyes with his hand after dropping his glove. Finally the shepherd of the lower part also with a knee on the ground puts his hat in his hand but he doesn’t turn his head towards the Virgin. So, only his attitude makes him part of the scene but his gaze is (eyes are) not directed towards the apparition.

Seven big trees surround the group of the two shepherds and the Virgin, showing the ovoid shape of the celestial group. This scene doesn’t illustrate any theme quoted in the canonical or apocryphal texts.

However, this representation of the Virgin standing on a crescent of the moon and surrounded by a bright thick cloud corresponds in the late fifteenth century to the image of the Immaculate Conception, which derives its attributes from the woman dressed in the sun of the Apocalypse. The species of the trees that make up the landscape is itself linked to a Marian symbolism. Thus we find from left to right, the orange tree and the pomegranate tree, the baby in my arms) not directed towards the apparition. There are also the ox and the donkey from the traditional crib and, accompanying the shepherds, a goat and a dog. At the bottom of the scene, a basket filled with fruits and oddly, the pieces of a broken column.

Below in the cartouche we can read the meaning of the scene, the names of sponsors and the year of its making: “Bringing quickly roses, violets and lily, the Son down from Heaven on Earth is lying on the ground for lack of hay”.

The tapestry was made at the expense of the “Fabrique” (parish council) from here, prosecutors of the said “Fabrique” being FABRICE MAISTRES, JEAN PELLE, Lord of Grillemont, URBAN LE FORT, ESTIENE PESCHEREU ET MICHEL HARDOUIN, year 1619. The history of the collection is not well known apart from the eleven medieval pieces (woven from 1460 till 1529) and among which five are considered as more profane. Among these profane hangings, the Hawking, the Savages and the Vengeance of Our Lord are shown since 1985 in the Museum of the Decorative arts -- the Life of the Virgin, the Tree of Jesse, the Adoration of the shepherds, the carrier Angels of the Passion’s instruments, the Apparition of the Virgin to the shepherds and the Dormition (Death) of the Virgin -- dated from 1460 till approximately 1529 -- are the oldest ones.

The lower part (117 cm) may have been added at the time of its weaving or while a medieval restoration having replaced a damaged or nonexistent part. Indeed, the top part should have been stretched out over the current limit, the cartouche decorated with a rose, placed at the bottom of its border which cannot receive any horizontal return. It clearly looks coarser with clumsiness in the joining of the torso and the legs of the shepherd, in the hesitating lines of the face, in the hand whose thumb is badly joined to the other fingers.

The Pentecost is the only one which is complete with a center panel and border; the Crucifixion was severed from the bottom and the Ascension has disappeared. The Nativity and the Circumcision as well as the Visitation -- the only scenes shown here -- were severely damaged by rodents and insects and are now restored (Bobin Tradition workshops - Paris) and are shown this year for the first time. Borders are identical on all sides, where they still exist. They are illustrated with foliages, fruits and small animals, rabbits, squirrels, birds...

2 - The Nativity and the Circumcision (296 cm x 500 cm)

This piece shows the two scenes but was deprived of its upper border. The lack of perspective is less noticeable than in the tapestry of the Visitatin. In the background of the Circumcision and the Visitatin, we can notice architectural and figures’ similarities, particularly in the representation of the Virgin. They also confirm by their style, the medieval origin of the cartoon used as model by the weavers.

- The Nativity -- In the scenery which is a cowshed - the column separating the two scenes should be joined the Circumcision - the Virgin, with folded hands, stands next to the infant who seems raked. Joseph is behind and looks at him. Below, the little figure seems to be blowing with its trumpet the heavenly light which floods and haloes the baby Jesus so much that it makes it almost invisible. This will be symbolized later by little angels always at the top and often, on both sides of the composition. Here, the angels are upper left and facing each other.

On the left, the shepherds throng at the door of the cowshed to admire the infant. There are also the ox and the donkey from the traditional crib and, accompanying the shepherds, a goat and a dog. At the bottom of the scene, a basket filled with fruits and oddly, the pieces of a broken column.

Thus we find from left to right, the orange tree and the pomegranate tree linked to chastity, the palm tree from the Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs, one of the poetical books of the Old Testament), the apple tree reminding the salutary role of the Virgin, new Eve, and lastly the citron tree and the fig tree, all symbols of the Immaculate Conception.

- The Circumcision -- In this scene the high priest officiates in the presence of Mary who is behind Jesus and barely visible in the halo and Joseph, quite to the right, turning his head. Jesus also has his head in a halo. In the New Testament, only Luke (II, 21) evokes the circumcision of Jesus in the “eighth day”: “And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcision of the child, his name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” The same angel had previously evoked (I, 59) the circumcision of the future John the Baptist: “that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father.” A letter from Paul of Tarsus also alludes to the “circumcision of Christ” in a theological document (Col. II, 11). Below in the cartouche we can read: “Divine sacrificator looks at who you touch and on whom you push the stone is the Savior”.

- The Visitatin (XVIth century) (360 cm x 250 cm) Aubusson Workshop

This piece, found in 1987 was restored in 2011. It is presently offered this year to the public.

It was probably made from a medieval era cartoon and that explains the total lack of perspective in the represented scene, which was no longer the case at the time of his weaving. This can be compared with the nearby tapestry of the Dormition.

The Visitatin relates the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, but especially the mysterious encounter between two beings through two expectant mothers, one with the Messiah and the other with “the Precursor” (John the Baptist, son of Zachariah). That is quoted in the Gospel of Luke (1, 44): “As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.” And we can read the same thing in the cartouche: “As soon as very chaste Virgin that your voice entered my ear the six-month-old baby has thrilled in my womb”.

6 - The Visitatin - (XVIIth century) (102 cm x 540 cm) Aubusson Workshop

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General presentation of the tapestries collection

Notre-Dame of Nantilly possesses an important collection of tapestries consisted in 26 pieces realized between XVth and XVIIIth centuries which are alternately shown. By their variety they are representative of the craftsmen’s art and production from the end of the Middle Ages to the Revolution. The six medieval pieces -- the Life of the Virgin, the Tree of Jesse, the Adoration of the shepherds, the carrier Angels of the Passion’s instruments, the Apparition of the Virgin to the shepherds and the Dormition (Death) of the Virgin -- dated from 1460 till approximately 1529 -- are the oldest ones.

The history of the collection is not well known apart from the eleven medieval pieces (woven from 1460 till 1529) and among which five are considered as more profane. Among these profane hangings, the Hawking, the Savages and the Vengeance of Our Lord are shown since 1985 in the Museum of the Decorative arts in the castle of Saumur: The oral tradition but which has no historic foundation, makes Louis XI the donor of the medieval tapestries of Nantilly. The tapestries of the XVIth seem to have fallen into disgrace in the second half of the XXth century and “are left to humidity and destruction”. In 1904, all the pieces are registered as "Historic Monument". They are sent for restoration to the Gobelins Manufactory in 1927 and the Dormition of the Virgin and the Musician Angels were sewn the one on the other one. During the Second World War, the tapestries were kept in a walled up cave.

Note also that the City of Saumur possesses an exceptional collection of 75 tapestries in total including the ones of N-D de Nantilly, the Life of Saint Peter and a major set, the hanging representing 25 scenes of the Life of Saint Florent and Saint Florian. This set is shown during summer season in the Saint-Jean Chapel (nearby the City hall).