

À Ciel- To The Sky

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Last summer, my suburb adopted the street decoration technique I had previously appreciated in downtown Chicago on Michigan Avenue -- that of hanging a colorful rectangular banner from every lamp pole, to announce the various seasonal festivals in store. I have always caught a sense of excitement and anticipation from such decoration, the feeling that a parade would come by any moment.

Ah, friends, there is nothing new under the sun! Once again, the origins of such textile street decoration takes us back to the so-called Dark Ages. In the Middle Ages, textiles were used to decorate the street fronts of urban buildings. During festivals, processions, the reception of royalty and other special occasions, the townspeople would drape the facades of their houses with decorative fabrics, transforming the ordinary surroundings and displaying their own wealth and good taste.

There are many written accounts of this practice. One of the earliest dates all the way back to the 6th century, an account of the baptism of Clovis, King of the Franks, written by Geoffrey of Tours. 600 years later, Ulrich Von Eschenback's poem Alexander described the streets of Babylon prepared for the entry of Alexander the Great.

". . . and all the streets were hung
with large bright cloths.

The marketplace and all of the temples.

The altar and all of the shrines
were draped and adorned
With many varied colors.
Now nothing was neglected:
in the city all the streets
were prepared with carpets,
very precious cloths were spread upon them,
they radiated a golden shine. . ."

And a French 14th century chronicler, Jean Froissart, observed that when Isabelle of Bavaria entered Paris in 1389, Rue St. Denis was draped "à ciel" --to the skies-- with rich silks from Alexandria and Damascus.

Visual records of this practice show valuable textiles hung from the second story windows that face the street. A panel painted by Giovanni di Francesco Toscani, The Race of the Palio in the Streets of Florence, shows people leaning out of their windows to watch the horse race below, elbows resting on what appear to be Turkish carpets covering the sills and fluttering down the wall. Similar decoration can be seen in other art works, textiles hanging over balcony rails, from which balconies elegantly dressed noble men and women cheer on the joust. Such a scene is portrayed carved in the lid of an ivory casket of Franco-German origin. It dates to the early 14th century and is owned by the Cleveland Museum of Art.

In our attempt to create a special, distinctively medieval atmosphere, one very simple and relatively inexpensive way to achieve a "feeling" is by the use of lavish textiles. The most

memorably beautiful feasts I've ever attended have all included cloth banners draped "à ciel"--not only against the walls, but falling freely from the ceilings down the center of the hall.