

Adoration of the Magi Tapestry



**ONGOING RESTORATION REPORT
APRIL 2024**

Description

Artist: **Manufacture of Pieter van Aelst**

Date: **1524-1531**

Classification: **Tapestry**

Dimensions: **568 x 958 cm**

Materials: **Wool, Silk, Metallic yarn**

The subject of the large and sumptuous tapestry, with its considerable dimensions, illustrates the famous episode described in the Gospel of Matthew (2:1-12) of the homage of the Magi, who came from afar guided by the Star of the Comet, to the newborn Child Jesus in Bethlehem.

This tapestry is part of the so-called "New School" series, consisting of twelve pieces depicting stories from the Life of Christ, now on display in the Tapestry Gallery in the Vatican Museums, within the museum itinerary.

Completed at the time of Clement VII (1523-1534), the *ensemble* was made to designs by Raphael's pupils in the *atelier* of the pope's famous tapestry maker, Pieter van Aelst in Brussels, who a few years earlier had already authored the renowned cloths with the *Acts of the Apostles*, commissioned by Leo X (1513-1521) to adorn the walls of the Sistine Chapel.

Woven in wool, silk, silver, and gilded silver yarns, the precious tapestries of the New School show a highly refined execution, characteristic of a workshop such as Pieter van Aelst's, which used not only fine yarns but also state-of-the-art techniques in its work.

The twelve tapestries can be divided into two groups, the first dedicated to the episodes of Christ's Infancy: Adoration of the Shepherds, Adoration of the Magi, Presentation in the Temple, and Massacre of the Innocents (this last scene is composed of three pieces); the second group depicts the events that took place after the Crucifixion (a moment that does not appear in the series): Resurrection, Christ in Limbo, Noli me Tangere, Supper at Emmaus, Ascension, Descent of the Holy Spirit.

These two groups were displayed inside the apostolic palace on different occasions, such as public and private consistories and at times of official representation.



The Raphael tapestries hanging in the Sistine Chapel, 2020



The entire series of tapestries of the highest quality, boof the materials used and the superb craftsmanship, was paid the considerable amount of 20,750 ducats. The cloths arrived in Rome in 1531, the year in which they were estimated on March 14 by embroiderers Angelo da Cremona and Joanne Lengles de Calais, who even judged their manufacture to be better and richer in gold and silk than the tapestries featuring the *Acts of the Apostles*.

After the great success of the tapestries commissioned by Leo X for the Sistine Chapel, the designs for this new series, conceived perhaps still alive by Raphael and woven after the death of the Urbino master (which occurred in 1520), are attributed to the great painter's pupils, who had already participated in the making of the cartoons for the previous venture. These were artists of the highest caliber, such as Giulio Romano and Giovan Francesco Penni, who devoted themselves to the composition of wonderfully articulated scenes based on many of Raphael's ideas and drawings.

The scene of the *Adoration of the Magi*, particularly crowded with figures and rich in detail, shows, in fact, some elements directly derived from Raphael's drawings, as well as some inventions traceable to the masterful hand of Giulio Romano, the true heir to the workshop of the great Urbino, who was active at the Master's death in the Hall of Constantine.

The movement of the bodies within the composition and the significant gestures, charged with solemnity, tell the famous episode of Jesus' infancy engagingly and emotionally. Nothing is missed in the accurate description of the event: the blades of grass, the preciousness of the robes and hairstyles match an extraordinary repertoire of exotic animals, including the elephant with a playful monkey on its back.

The solid balance of forms and a highly refined and complex figure design offer the eye an exceptional testimony from the great Roman Renaissance tradition, rich in relevant references to ancient culture, yet already with an openness to the most modern artistic innovations of the 16th century.









Front



Back

Restoration Procedure

As always, at the beginning of a restoration, the Vatican Museums' photographer carried out a photographic campaign to document the state of preservation and any intervention.

To be able to photograph the front, the tapestry was first unlined, and, where possible, the restorers removed the supports used in previous restorations.



In this photo, the restorer is carrying out the removal of the lining



Removal of some supports and non-original selvages from previous restorations



There are only a few circumstances where it is possible to view both sides of the tapestry, and being able to make a photographic record at this stage is essential. For instance, the change of dyes (the variation from one color to another due to particular chemical transformations) makes the scene flatter and less vivid.



Front



Back



Front



Back



Front



Back

At the end of this process, the incoherent particles were carefully vacuumed. The tapestry was extremely dry and dusty.



The restorers then placed the tapestry on two frames in the laboratory. The large size of the tapestry did not allow the use of a single frame, as usual.



A new phase of preparation for washing then began. Firstly, stability tests were carried out on the yarns to see if there were any dyes present that could cause problems during washing. As visible in the photos below, the blue color of the restoration yarns dyes when placed in water, and they also have dyeing power (see the white fabric in the third photo), so it was necessary to remove all these previous interventions.



Yarns dipped in aqueous solution with similar, but increased characteristics compared to washing



Restoration yarn that loses colour, and therefore needs to be removed to avoid problems during washing

Preparation for washing consists of removing restorations that cause tension and deformation and, as mentioned above, the removal of yarns that could lose their color during washing. This preparation consists of tying the free warps on heat-sealed netting or, in the case of gaps, tying them with white cotton yarn, which is easily visible, to prevent deformation during cleaning in an aqueous solution. This crucial and delicate operation can take up to several months.



the area from which a previous restoration was removed



Fermatura degli orditi liberi



Fastening on heat-sealed net that will be removed after washing



Graphic documentation is also carried out, starting with a basic graph that will later be used to show the state of preservation, yarn sampling points, work progress, etc.





Details of the damages



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