



CATERINA E MARIA DE' MEDICI: DONNE AL POTERE

FIRENZE CELEBRA IL MITO DI DUE REGINE DI FRANCIA

FIRENZE PALAZZO STROZZI
24 OTTOBRE 2008 – 8 FEBBRAIO 2009



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Tapestry-makers: Artists or Craftsmen?

The Bièvre is a brook that crosses Paris and empties into the Seine in the Faubourg St. Marcel, by the Gare d'Austerlitz. The Gobelins family, artisans specializing in the manufacture of scarlet dye, moved to the area from Rheims in the mid-15th century, initially giving their name to a mill on the Bièvre, then to the neighborhood as a whole, and finally to the celebrated tapestry manufacture.

The Artemisia series, around which the Palazzo Strozzi exhibition entitled *Women in Power: Caterina and Maria de Medici. The Return to Florence of Two Queens* is built, actually belong to the pre-Gobelins era. In the early years of the 17th century King Henri IV entrusted a manufacture in the Faubourg St. Marcel to two skilled Flemish tapestry weavers named François de La Planche and Marc de Comans. Here and in similar manufactures the work was initially based on 16th century models, or on models more recent but still mannerist in flavor (the *Stories of Artemisia*, of *Coriolanus* and of *Diana*, for example). The turning point came with Rubens' cartoons for the *Story of Constantine* and, after 1627, with such baroque models as the dynamic and glowing work of Simon Vouet, or the classical themes of Michel Corneille and Laurent de la Hyre, both painters of the Attic school, starting to be transposed onto tapestry.

In this period known as the "pre-Gobelins era", manufactures operated under the strict supervision of the crown, in the person of the superintendent of the Batiments du Roi who was responsible for choosing subject matter, painters and raw materials. This led to the creation of a typically French form of workshop funded and controlled by the state, unlike the private enterprises that flourished in Flanders. A crucial step in the process that was to lead to the establishment of the Gobelins manufacture was Superintendent Nicholas Fouquet's decision to open a workshop in Maincy, to provide wall hangings for the nearby château of Vaux-le-Vicomte. When Maincy was closed down in 1661, the crown took over both its looms and its artisans and brought them to Paris, where it set them up on the premises formerly belonging to the Gobelins.

This huge tapestry manufacture became part of the *Manufacture Royale des Meubles de la Couronne* which Colbert organized for Louis XIV in 1667. The resulting Gobelins Manufacture, as it became known, was tasked with producing luxury *objets d'art* and wall hangings for the nobility. After financial concerns caused it to shut down a first time, it reopened in the late 17th century to produce tapestries for royal use only. Its activity was frozen for a second time by the Revolution of 1789, but the Bourbons started it up again during the Restoration, even adding a workshop for the manufacture of carpets. A fire partly destroyed the building during the troubles under the Comune in 1871, but it was rebuilt in 1914. Today the Gobelins Manufacture is run by the government-owned *Mobilier national*. It houses a museum and workshops where it still turns out tapestries for the adornment of public buildings.

Tapestry weaving is a noble art form, yet one whose deepest roots lie in the craftsman's world. The medieval English word for tapestry was *arras*, undoubtedly a reference to the northern French city of Arras where the most celebrated medieval tapestries were manufactured. Technically an *arras*, or tapestry, is a

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textile woven on a loom using wool, cotton, linen or silk (and metal thread). The process is known as weft-faced weaving because all of the warp yarns are hidden in the completed work. It is usually monumental in size with extremely detailed imagery.

The preparatory *cartoon* is a full-scale drawing generally made by an artist of repute, but the end result depends on the tapestry-maker's skill in translating that drawing onto his medium.

People have been weaving tapestries in the Mediterranean area, in Japan and in pre-Columbian America from time immemorial. The oldest examples go back to Ancient Egypt and late Hellenic Greece. Designed to be hung on large walls for decorative and/or narrative display, tapestries also performed a useful insulating function in the large halls and chambers of the time. Their success may also be partially explained by their portability from one residence to the next. A fresco stayed put, while a tapestry could simply be rolled up and loaded onto a cart.

Tapestry weaving in Europe goes back to the early 14th century in Germany and Switzerland, and then in France and the Low Countries. The Renaissance marked the high point of this art form, particularly in Flanders and in France. Some of the world's greatest painters produced cartoons for tapestries: Raphael, Rubens, Goya, and more recently Picasso, Matisse and Mirò. Tapestries take so long to manufacture, however, that the cost soon became prohibitive. The bankruptcy of many noble families even caused the Gobelins manufacture to shut down for a while. With the start of the industrial revolution and rising labor costs in the late 18th century, tapestries started to go out of fashion. The mob put them to the torch in the French Revolution, both to recover the gold thread used in weaving them and to destroy a symbol of the hated aristocracy.

The crisis also forced many Italian tapestry manufactures to close down, and only a government subsidy allowed the papal tapestry workshop in Rome, the *Fabbrica pontificia di San Michele a Ripa*, to hold out until 1910. Today the art of tapestry weaving survives in a tiny niche market and in workshops devoted to the restoration of historic tapestries, an area in which the *Opificio delle Pietre Dure* in Florence excels.

In technical terms, tapestries are one of the clearest examples of how a few basic moves of the loom can perpetuate visual and emotional warmth down the centuries. The process is based on the weaving of threads that are perpendicular to one another. The vertical thread is known as the warp, while the horizontal thread is called the weft. The warp threads are divided into two groups called even and uneven threads. Each of the two groups is raised in turn by a high-warp or low-warp loom, according to whether the warping is set vertically or horizontally. The weft is interlaced into the space formed by the uneven and even threads rising in rapid succession, and the buildup of the wefts is what produces the finished fabric.

A feature peculiar to tapestries is the thickness of the yarn used: the warp is thick while the weft is extremely fine. This unique process ensures that the wefts cover the warp completely, giving a tapestry its typical ribbed finish.

The wefts are added to the tapestry by color zone in accordance with the indications on the cartoon, to which the weavers adhered very strictly. At the same time, their skill and experience in the choice of

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materials would impart added value to the original artist's work. They would commonly choose not only wool and silk but also gold and silver thread. The thickness of the yarn employed (the *thread count*) dictates the delicacy of the tapestry, with the use of fine yarn resulting in an altogether more precious work because the thinner the yarn used, the more accurate and effective the rendering of even the most complex cartoon.

The richness of the colors used also adds considerable aesthetic value to a tapestry. The art of dyeing, on whose quality and richness a tapestry's success might well depend, developed in parallel with the art of weaving. The dyer's art demands familiarity with the way the substances used to impart color react, and whether or not those substances are suitable for dyeing whole bundles of yarn. Indigo, woad, madder and many other colors of vegetable origin were used for centuries, as were colors extracted from animals (cochineal) and minerals. The colors are in many cases still (almost) as bright today as they were when the tapestries were first woven, helping to foster continued interest in the very special art form of tapestry weaving.

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