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CLEAN-UP OPERATION

Conservation at the The Royal Manufactures of Tapestry, De Wit in Belgium

If the restoring of paintings is meticulous and time consuming, think how much harder it is to repair antique tapestries with their sheer size and transportation problems. The Royal Manufactures of Tapestry, De Wit in Belgium however, undaunted by these considerations, has been dealing with tapestries since its foundation in 1889. Nowadays their staff routinely collect tapestries from leading museums and collectors world-wide and bring them safely ensconced in tubes, to the workshops for conservation.

The vogue for tapestries in aristocratic house and royal courts peaked in the sixteenth century (the English crown had 2,450 of them) when they were far more valuable than paintings. Unsurprisingly, those, which have survived, have in many cases, undergone interim interventions which have not always been beneficial. In fact as well as the decomposition of old silk weft threads from exposure to light and that of dark wool weft threads due to the use of chemical mordants, the most serious damage comes from such treatments as rubbing with bread to refresh 'decaied colors,' painting in lost details, patching and even gluing in additional sections.

All this can be learned on a visit to De Wit's establishment in the attractive and spacious building of the old Refuge of Tongelo Abbey in Mechelen. There, An Volckaert, the Academic Advisor and Yvan Maes De Wit, the President and grandson of the founder, take visitors through some of the stages of their world famous conservation programme.

The focus is very much on conservation i.e. the preservation of the tapestry's cultural property for the future by interventions which 'do no harm' and can be reversed if or when better methods emerge, rather than restoration involving permanent procedures to return the tapestry to its presumed 'original' state. It is nevertheless understood that an aesthetic compromise sometimes has to be reached in the case of items which are on public display.

When a tapestry arrives at De Wit, first the lining is removed and dust eliminated in a dedicated Dust Room, isolated from other rooms to prevent contamination. Here the tapestry is laid on a specially designed and lit glass table and dust is removed by microsuction. After this it enters the large state-of-the-art cleaning facility, which De Wit patented in 1991. It is unrolled and laid on a large suction table, above which 45 aerosol sprinklers send a mix of compressed air and water and a weak solution of neutral detergent through the fabric, gradually loosening the dirt which is immediately sucked down into the base of the table.

This is repeated several times with diminishing amounts of detergent and takes about an hour. It is then rinsed for about 2 hours with softened water and demineralized water for half hour and then dried. The equipment avoids harming weak or fragile material by handling, it prevents irregular shrinkage, and in some cases even helps to restore the shape of old fabric. Every step is monitored and photographed.

The cleaned tapestry then passes to the conservators and is placed on frames so that the tapestry can be rolled or unrolled. Working on the right side, old slits are re-sewn before consolidation materials made of high quality prewashed linen dyed to the appropriate colour are applied to the reverse. If parts are missing more substantial intervention may be required and this, in consultation with the tapestry's curator, is undertaken in such a way as to avoid the missing areas disturbing the original elements of the work rather than recreating them.

A number of museums, having had their tapestries cleaned by De Wit, for reasons of security or other, undertake the conservation themselves. Such was the case with the Dame à la Licorne tapestries from the Musée de Cluny in Paris. These exquisite and much loved tapestries dating from the early 1500s, with their unusual red millefiore backgrounds illustrate the five senses, plus a sixth, the enigmatic 'mon seul désir.' Before arriving at the Musée de Cluny in 1882 they had been abandoned to rats and humidity and were very dirty. They had also suffered some unfortunate interventions over the years and after cleaning at De Wit they returned to the museum for consolidation. Originally the weft threads were dyed with natural materials and this procedure was adhered to: the reds being derived from madder, kermes and cochineal, the blues from indigo, the yellows from weld and young fustic etc. Some three shades of 30 natural colours were employed. The borders were reassembled and the tapestries were adjusted for tension, and relined.

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They were then hung slightly sloping to prevent tension problems.

There are of course some museums which carry out all the conservation work themselves. For example, the Vatican Museum recently conserved the *Last Supper Tapestry*, derived from Leonardo da Vinci's fresco. First an analysis which included ultra violet and infrared investigations was made. It was decided to start with a mechanical dry cleaning, and then to rehydrate the tapestry using natural sponges. Fragile areas were consolidated with couching stitches done with thin yarn and a surgical needle. A 'sandwich' technique was used in which the existing lining served as a support, and appropriately dyed nylon tulle with a high degree of transparency was sewn over the surface to protect it. Another intervention was chosen for the tablecloth area which was quite badly degraded. Localised support in the form of colour-dyed silk organza was inserted and the tapestry was then relined with light cotton for a more equitable distribution of weight and tension. The revitalised tapestry delighted crowds in Milan and Amboise in 2019, the 500th Anniversary of Leonardo's death, before returning to permanent exhibition in the Vatican Museum.*** **Patricia Cleveland-Peck.** Patricia travelled to Paris courtesy of Kirker Holidays www.kirkerholidays.com, and to Belgium courtesy of Visit Flanders www.visitflanders.com and www.visitmechelen.be. De Wit Royal Manufacturers of Tapestry gives guided tours for individuals every Saturday at 10.30 www.dewit.be

