

## **The History of Tapestry Conservation and Exhibition at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine** *Camille Myers Breeze*

The Textile Conservation Laboratory of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine was established in 1981 to preserve the Cathedral's important collection of 17th-century English and Italian tapestries. In the fifteen years since the Lab took over the cavernous space that had once been the Cathedral Museum, a plethora of tapestries from private clients and institutions around the world have received conservation treatment, analysis, and relining by the experienced staff of professional conservators and interns. For the first time since the Lab's inception, we are once again working on our own collection which includes eight scenes of *The Acts of the Apostles*, seven of which were woven from the original Raphael cartoons, and a one-of-a-kind set of twelve Barberini tapestries depicting *The Life of Christ*.

### **History**

The first director of the Textile Conservation Lab, R. Bruce Hutchison, was hired in 1982. Under his leadership, the Lab was equipped with an electric hoist system, a sixteen- by twenty-foot wash table, a suction table, and dye laboratory, all with the help of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, J. P. Getty Grants Program, and the Municipal Arts Council. The current Director, Marlene Eidelheit, has been in charge since 1992, and will no doubt lead the Textile Conservation Lab into the next century.

Throughout the 1980's, the Lab gained prominence as museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Newark Museum, the Cincinnati Museum of Art, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and the Wadsworth Athenaeum turned to Bruce Hutchison and his staff for conservation treatments. As the field of textile conservation grew, Mr. Hutchison ensured that the Lab would be at the forefront of national and international development by participating in research and publications which set the standards for tapestry and textile conservation. His concise and detailed account of the Textile Conservation Lab's practices for conserving tapestries, *Gluttony and Avarice: Two Different Approaches*, appeared in "The Conservation of Tapestries and Embroideries," the Getty Conservation Institute publication of the proceedings of the meeting at the Royal Institute of Patrimony in Brussels in 1987. Today the Lab has grown to include carpets, quilts, embroidery, costume, ethnic, and archaeological textiles among its specialties, while continuing to develop and expand the field of tapestry conservation.

Since its inception, the lab has employed both professionally trained textile conservators as well as experienced volunteers. Many former employees have gone on to head conservation labs around the world, and our volunteers frequently move on to graduate training programs. In addition to Ms. Eidelheit and five Assistant Conservators, the Lab continues to accept qualified volunteers who possess technical skill, understanding of conservation practices, and desire to contribute to the field of art conservation.

### **The Barberinis**

The foundation stone of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine was laid on December 27, 1892. One year before Cathedral construction began, the donation of a unique set of 17th-century Italian Barberini tapestries was arranged through the efforts of Bishop Henry Codman Potter, the Rev. Morgan Dix, and a Mrs. Elizabeth U. Coles of Newport, RI and New York City. Mrs. Coles graciously acquired the tapestries from collector Charles M. Foulke of Washington, DC, who himself had purchased them from the Princess Barberini in 1889, and donate the entire set to the fledgling Cathedral. A hand-written note from Mrs. Coles dated May 20th, 1890 reads "Dear Sir, Many many thanks for your very pleasant note respecting the Sacred Tapestries I have been able to procure for the adornment of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. It gives me great pleasure that others share with me in the appreciation of the Tapestries." The estimated value of the Barberinis in 1891 was \$75,000 (Cathedral Archives).

This set of twelve monumental hangings was woven in Italy in the early 17th century for the nephew of the Barberini Pope, Urban VIII. The cartoons for the series, which were painted by Romanelli, have been preserved in the Palazzo Barberini in Rome, but no other tapestry sets were ever woven from them. The subjects are: *The Giving of the Keys; The Agony; The Flight into Egypt; The Adoration of the Magi; The Resurrection; The Transfiguration; The Crucifixion; The Last Supper; The Adoration of the Shepherds; The Baptism of Christ; The Annunciation; and The Map of the Holy Land*.

This generous donation shows great foresight and faith on the part of Mrs. Coles, as construction of the Cathedral Choir would not be completed until 1911. To protect his new acquisition, Bishop Potter had all twelve tapestries

placed in a vault at the Lincoln Save Deposit Company in 1891. They stayed there for nine years, according to a letter dated August 21, 1902 which states that, "...we removed the tapestries from our vault on June 14th ...cleaned and aired them, repacked them in camphor, and returned them to our vault on the 18th of July" (Cathedral Archives). We can only guess from this that they may have been cleaned with soap and water, packed in chemicals to deter infestation, and refolded before being placed back in storage.

In 1907 the Barberinis were loaned to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and several were put on exhibition "in the rotunda...and among the Morgan Loan Collection in the New West Wing". At that point their condition was assessed by the Metropolitan, and many received treatments such as "repaired here and there" and "repaired with patches". Three were not used, however, due to their "more or less mutilated condition" (Cathedral Archives).

The first services performed in the new Cathedral were held in the crypt, and we know that some of the Barberini tapestries were temporarily hung there. When the Choir of the Cathedral was completed and sealed off to the elements in 1911, several more Barberinis were returned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Their first destination seems to have been the curved upper walls of the choir so that they could be seen behind the high altar, between the great columns. By 1916, when construction began on the Nave of the Cathedral, seven still hung in the choir and four were displayed on the walls of the crossing. One tapestry, *The Map of the Holy Land*, remained in storage at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Barberinis may have hung undisturbed for fifteen years, but in 1926 at least four were taken to French & Company, Ltd. and "thoroughly cleaned by special process." French & Company were also responsible for "strapping and lining same with linen and repairing tapestries where necessary" (Cathedral Archives). As at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the tapestries would have received the best care available at French & Company, which handled much of the tapestry sales, assessment, cleaning, repairs, photography, and installation in and around New York during the early to middle part of this century. By 1928, all of the Barberinis had been "removed from the walls of the Cathedral and are at present in storage" (Cathedral Archives). One year later, *The Map of the Holy Land* was returned from the Metropolitan, where it had been stored since 1907.

In preparation for the completion and dedication of the Cathedral Nave in 1941, an all-out campaign of restoration of the Barberini tapestries began at the hand of the Baroness Wilhelmine von Godin, a lace-maker turned tapestry restorer, trained in Munich. A New York Times article dated January 7th, 1940, details the Baroness's progress on the Barberinis: one tapestry, *The Crucifixion*, was "completely restored within a few weeks", yet approximately one year was spent on *The Adoration of the Magi* alone. Of this tapestry, the Baroness stated that the "fine shading of the wings [of the bees on the Barberini crest] is being reproduced with exactitude. One medallion represents two week's work." The most surprising facet of the Baroness's work to the present-day conservator is not simply that she single-handedly took on these huge and fragile tapestries, but also the fact that she earned so much attention from the media that her repair looms were set up in view of the public at the Pedac Galleries near Rockefeller Center.

By the mid 1940's, the Barberini tapestries had been restored and relined, and were once again hanging throughout the newly expanded Cathedral. Photographs from the past fifty years show various tapestries in the Exhibit Hall (where the Textile Conservation Lab is now located), in the crossing, around the upper walls of the choir, and in the Chapel of St. James, which was dedicated to Bishop Potter, whose sarcophagus is there. Sometime in the last 25 years, all twelve of the Barberinis were assembled in two groups of six and hung in a grid pattern on both the South and North walls of the crossing--the Cathedral has no true transept arms. Today nine tapestries are still hanging via the 1940's method: suspended from metal rings which have been sewn to the reverse of the top gallon. As the crossing is the focal point of many of the ecclesiastical and secular productions for which the cathedral is used, it is not unusual to see crews of technicians working within inches of the tapestries. One tapestry, *The Adoration*, has been in the Lab ever since it received some major damage to its gallon and top border from a run-in with a careless rigger. Two other tapestries were removed for conservation in the 1980's and are also in the Lab.

The field of textile conservation had advanced dramatically between the time of the Baroness von Godin and 1982, when Bruce Hutchison and his assistants addressed the needs of the Barberini tapestries once again. Using the giant wash table--which was constructed to the dimensions of the largest Barberini tapestry--the latest conservation techniques were employed to clean away decades of New York soot and Cathedral incense smoke using gentle surfactants and de-ionized water. After washing, the tapestries were sewn to metal and wooden tensioners where the reweaving and stabilization was done. After the repairs were complete, the tapestries were taken off the tensioners, stabilized with vertical straps, and lined. Sadly, work on the Barberinis stopped after a few years, as grant money ran out and the Textile Conservation Lab began working for outside clients.

In 1995, the Textile Conservation Laboratory was awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation to resume work on the Barberini Tapestries. Our first priority for this second stage of conservation was to survey the nine tapestries which are still hanging in the cathedral crossing, as well as the three which have been in storage in the Lab. A scissor-lift was rented to raise the conservators thirty feet into the air to assess the condition of the nine hanging tapestries, which turned out to be not quite as dirty or dilapidated as had been feared: the dust, although thick, did not appear to be very waxy or greasy, and to some degree, what was believed to be irreversible light damage may actually be a distortion of the images from their coating of dust and the every-day low light of the crossing. The overall conservation needs, as well as the money needed to clean, stabilize, reline, and re-hang the Barberini tapestries has now be more accurately estimated.

### ***The Acts of the Apostles***

The other monumental set of tapestries hanging in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine is entitled *The Acts of the Apostles*, based on events in the New Testament's Book of Acts. They were copied from the famous Raphael Cartoons, which were designed for a set of tapestries woven between 1517 and 1521 by Flemish master weaver Pieter van Aelst. The original set of ten tapestries was commissioned by Pope Leo X to fill the lower walls of the Sistine Chapel. Three of the cartoons were lost very early on, but the remaining seven were purchased in Geneva in 1623 by England's Prince of Wales, later King Charles I. The Mortlake Tapestry Manufactory immediately began to weave copies of the Raphael cartoons under the direction of Sir Frances Crane. The Cathedral's set, donated by Mrs. Margaret Louise Brugiere in 1954, is one of 55 complete or partial sets of tapestries known to have been made from the Raphael Cartoons.

Our set of *Acts of the Apostles* tapestries was commissioned by Daniel Finch, Second Earl of Nottingham, in 1699 or shortly before. This is very late for Mortlake tapestries, as the factory was struggling as early as 1670 (Standen, 701), and would close in 1703 (Cathedral Archives). It is highly likely that the tapestries were woven earlier, as the Raphael cartoons were reassembled, restored, and hung on exhibit in Hampton Court by 1699 (Meyer, 18). In a letter dated 1700 from the Earl of Nottingham to a weaver, Stephen Demay, of Lambeth, it is clear that the tapestries had yet to be finished. A year later Demay wrote that he went to "ye Inn to fetch the hangings...I found they were damaged and had them thoroughly dry they are now verry well come to themselves" (Finch, 94). Did Demay oversee all of the weaving of the tapestries, or did he only complete the job?

Although it is difficult to piece together the history of our set, some details are clear. Demay probably worked for the Mortlake factory at one time, as his weaver's mark can be found on tapestries also containing the Mortlake mark (Bennett, 302). Whether he was responsible for the weaving of the tapestries from the outset or not, in 1700 Demay received from the Earl the dimensions that the tapestries had to be in order to fit into the Earl's house, Burley-on-the-Hill, in Rutland (Finch, 93). These odd dimensions required that new cartoons be painted for those tapestries being enlarged, as well as new borders incorporating the Coat of Arms of the Earl of Nottingham. Conspicuously absent from our set, unfortunately, are the Mortlake shield and monogram of Sir Francis Crane, which were woven into the selvedge of some of the sets. Nor do our tapestries bear the mark "Car re reg Mort", which stands for *Carilo rege regnante Mortlake*, or "made at Mortlake in the reign of King Charles" (Cathedral Archives). More research into the origins of this set of tapestries remains to be undertaken.

A total of ten tapestries were donated to the Cathedral by Mrs. Margaret Louise Brugiere in honor of her late husband. One is 18 th -century Flemish, of an unknown subject. The set of nine Mortlakes includes the subjects of the remaining seven Raphael cartoons— *The Death of Ananias*, *Paul Preaching in Athens*, *The Blinding of Elymas*, *The Healing of the Lame Man*, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, *Christ's Charge to St. Peter*, and *The Sacrifice at Lystra*—as well as companion piece to *The Death of Ananias*, called *The Death of Saphira*, which has no precedent in the Raphael Cartoons. In addition, *Christ's Charge to St. Peter* was cut into two pieces, bringing the total up to nine. The tapestries had been in the collection of Major James Hanbury of Burley-on-the-Hill, and were sold at auction by Christie, Mason & Woods on March 26, 1953 (Cathedral Archives). In a letter to Mr. Brugiere dated August 4, 1953, Canon West expresses great interest in having the tapestries donated to the Cathedral.

According to the wishes of Mrs. Brugiere, French & Company, Inc. were once again contracted for the cleaning, strapping, lining, and hanging of the tapestries. By June, 1954, the work was complete and four months later the tapestries were installed in the bays of the Nave and dedicated by the Bishop. Unlike the Barberini tapestries, the Mortlakes were not moved around the Cathedral, but remain hanging in the bays. All but two of them, that is. About 20 years ago, someone tore down the smaller half of *Christ's Charge to St. Peter*—the image of Christ—and fled. The tapestry was never recovered. In the last decade, *The Sacrifice at Lystra* had to be removed from its bay because the aquariums of the Gaia Institute that were installed in front of it had caused an outbreak of mold. It is now in storage at the Lab.

With such a complex history behind the *Acts of the Apostles* set, it was no wonder that *The Death of Ananias* would present the conservation problems that it did. During the initial evaluation while still hanging, it was noticed that the tapestry--which measured 19-feet wide by 12.5-feet tall when hung--had two large folds on either side, just inside both borders. Preliminary exploration showed that these turn-backs were contiguous to the main body of the tapestry and were not later additions. When a photograph of the Raphael cartoon was consulted, it became clear that the tapestry had been folded to correspond almost exactly to the original image. The reason for the fold was obvious: this tapestry, and several others, would be too wide to fit in the Bays when fully opened. Upon consulting photographs of all of the tapestries *en situ* at Burley-on-the-Hill, taken in 1901, we could see the additions that Demay had woven, and how well the tapestries had fit into their surroundings. The explanation for *Christ's Charge to St. Peter* being in two pieces was also clear: it had been cut, or woven, in two pieces so that it could be hung on either side of a fireplace.

Another curious feature of *The Death of Ananias* that soon became apparent is that a seam runs all the way from the top to the bottom of the tapestry. Unlike most cuts seen on tapestries, which are made to accommodate a window or door, or to remove a figure and replace it with another, this seam follows the contours of the figures it passes through, so that it is virtually undetectable to an untrained eye. If the tapestry had indeed been cut, it was put back together without any unraveling of weft, or interruption of design. Careful inspection of the back of the seam shows that sections of the cut are edged with green weft which serves to lock the patterned weft in place. This technique suggests that the weavers knew exactly where each of the two halves of the tapestry were to be joined. Our conclusion that the tapestry had been woven simultaneously on two different looms was substantiated by Tom Campbell, Curator of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, Metropolitan Museum of Art, who said that it could have been done to expedite the tapestry's completion. The remaining seven tapestries in the set were examined and five were found to have either one or two such seams.

The final unexpected challenge presented by *The Death of Ananias* was the direct result of one or more previous conservation attempts. When the tapestry was inspected in the dim light of the cathedral, darkened areas of exposed warp were taken to have been painted over with brown paint to make them less conspicuous. In the lab, however, it became immediately apparent that these darkened areas were caused by the application of an adhesive applied from the reverse with linen patches. The appearance, odor, and solubility in water all confirmed that it was an organic adhesive, probably hide glue. Nancy Britton, Conservator of Upholstery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, suggested that hide glue applied as recently as the 1950's would have been combined with some synthetic resins, and would not have been soluble in water, as our was. We can assume, therefore, that this crude adhesive treatment pre-dates the importation of the tapestries to the United States.

The decision was made to remove this antiquated hide glue treatment both for aesthetic reasons and because the encrustations were stiff and even sharp in places, and would only acidify further with age. The areas which had received the majority of the glue were, naturally, those with silk weft, which tends to deteriorate quicker with age and light exposure. This meant that any manipulation we used to remove the adhesive would run the risk of removing the silk weft as well. In order to cut down on the handling time, a solution of 60% Ethyl Alcohol and 40% de-ionized water was tested and eventually chosen for the task. This Ethyl Alcohol solution acts as a "wetter" water; in essence dissolving the hide glue quicker with less rubbing. Treated areas were flushed with de-ionized water to ensure that the silk weft and wool warp would not desiccate from any Ethyl Alcohol left behind. After the time-consuming task of removing the adhesive from all 25 feet of *Ananias* was complete, there were no further impediments to our treating it as we would any other delicate tapestry.

#### Conclusion:

Although work has just begun on these two important tapestry sets at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, there is a sense that our recent efforts have brought the urgency of their needs to both the Cathedral and outside communities. January 1997 will see a new Dean take the reigns of the Cathedral, and it will be the job of the Textile Conservation Lab and others who value and appreciate these tapestries to see that our new Dean is as much of an advocate for their future survival as has been the Very Reverend Dean James Parks Morton and the Rt. Hon. Bishop Richard Grein, under whom the Lab was founded and continues to thrive. As the next millennium approaches, we look forward to the technological advances and improvements that will occur when the Computer Age and the field of Textile Conservation inevitably merge, and anticipate the day when every tapestry hanging in the Cathedral lives up to the standards of conservation for the 21 st century.

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