

GLI ARAZZI DI GONZAGA NEL RINASCIMENTO

DA MANTEGNA A RAFFAELLO E GIULIO ROMANO

MANTOVA, PALAZZO TE 14 MARZO 27 GIUGNO 2010

A CURA DI GUY DELMARCEL

SOTTO L'ALTO PATRONATO
DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA
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Press release

GONZAGA TAPESTRIES IN THE RENAISSANCE From Mantegna to Raphael and Giulio Romano MANTUA, PALAZZO TE 14 March - 27 June 2010

"They all withdrew together in rooms hung with the finest and most beautiful drapes of gold, silver and silks of many colours, masterly arranged, in which numerous different lifelike animals, trees, fruit and flowers were to be seen that the great Parasius and the ingenious Phidias, one on canvas and the other in marble would have been at pains to represent with greater realism."

A witness at the wedding in October 1549 between Francesco III, son of duke Federico II, and Catherine of Austria thus describes the residence of **Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga in Mantua**.

Since ancient times precious textiles had been the favourite furnishings of kings and noblemen throughout Europe and from the mid 14th century the majority of these were tapestries. Almost like mobile frescoes, easily transported from one home to another, hung and taken down, these huge textiles both protected from the cold and bad weather and provided a coloured background. They also served to show off the wealth and standing of their patrons. **Most of the tapestries in the collections were made by Flemish artists and represented country scenes** which provided a sort of 'winter garden' during the cold season. However, others were inwrought with complex stories used as models and a means of self-commemoration. A cardinal, for instance, would commission **stories of Biblical heroes** such as David, Saul or Moses, or Christian figures from the *Acts of the Apostles*. A military man, on the other hand, would choose **non-religious stories**, like Aeneas, Alexander or the Labours of Hercules.

The fascinating spring exhibition ***Gonzaga tapestries in the Renaissance. From Mantegna to Raphael and Giulio Romano*** was commissioned by the **Scientific Committee** of the Centro di Palazzo Te, chairman **Salvatore Settis**. It is under the **High Patronage of the President of the Italian Republic** and **His Majesty King Albert II of Belgium**, and is supported by the **Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali** and the **Regione Lombardia Assessorato alle Culture, Identità e Autonomie della Lombardia**, promoted and organized by the **Comune di Mantova, Centro Internazionale d'Arte e Cultura di Palazzo Te, Museo Civico di Palazzo Te, Museo Diocesano Francesco Gonzaga, Museo di Palazzo Ducale – Soprintendenza per i Beni Storici Artistici ed Etnoantropologici per le Province di Mantova Brescia e Cremona and by the Archivio di Stato di Mantova**, supported by **Provincia di Mantova and the Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato e Agricoltura di Mantova**, with contributions from the **Fondazione Monte dei Paschi di Siena and Fondazione Banca Agricola Mantovana**. The exhibition curated by **Guy Delmarcel**, one of Europe's leading experts in the field in association with **Nello Forti Grazzini, Stefano L'Occaso and Lucia Meoni**, consists of **thirty-four of the finest tapestries owned by the Gonzaga and made during the Renaissance, along with documentary evidence**.

Following the example of other grand Italian families such as the Este of Ferrara or the Farnese at Parma the lords of Mantua began buying tapestries as early as the 15th century. But it was above all during the 16th century that acquisitions notably increased due to the interest of the three sons of Francesco II Gonzaga (1466-1519), fourth marquis of Mantua, and Isabella d'Este (1474-1539): Federico II (1500-1540), first duke and the builder of Palazzo Te; Ercole (1505-1563), cardinal and papal legate at the Council of Trent, and Ferrante (1507-

1557), commander in chief of the imperial troops, later governor of Milan and founder of the Guastalla branch of the family. Their collections, and to a lesser extent those of their successors, were of considerable size and importance. After his death in 1541, Federico's inventory included 315 pieces, unfortunately with scant detail about their subjects. Drawn up in 1590 the inventory of Ferrante's heirs, the lords of Guastalla, includes 27 sets and a total of 172 tapestries; dated 1614, the inventory of the lords of Mantua contains 57 sets with an overall total of 386 pieces. Over the centuries many of these tapestries were destroyed or worn threadbare and many were purchased by other Italian noblemen. Indeed when the Gonzaga of Guastalla branch died out in 1749 only 58 tapestries remained. **What has been handed down to us today is only a small part of the treasures of Isabella's three sons: one tapestry belonging to duke Federico, twenty-one to Ercole and thirty to Ferrante: a total of fifty-two pieces in all.** Most of them are currently on display at Palazzo Te along with several works from the beginning and the end of the 16th century.

Almost all were made in Flanders or in Italy by tapestry makers of Flemish descent. At that time the Southern Netherlands were the major manufacturers of tapestries, with Brussels as the heart and Antwerp, the largest port in northern Europe, as the main centre of commerce. The city had a dedicated market, the so-called "tapissierspand", where from 1554 onwards a large number of master tapestry weavers and merchants rented workshops. Foreign clients could buy ready-made sets or commission their own which would be woven from the cartoons they themselves provided. Flemish prevalence was due to the superiority in the design methods and organisational skills of the "art industry" in Brussels. Most of the weavers remain nameless although their manufacture is distinguishable by workshop marks which were obligatory in Brussels after 1528. At the time almost one third of Brussels' inhabitants were involved in tapestry production.

The substantial correspondence between Cardinal Ercole and his brother Ferrante and their agents sent to the North provides a lively image of the intense business deals undertaken. All these tapestries belong to the "golden age" of Flemish workmanship. However, **Flemish weavers were also at work in Italy.** For example, in October 1539, **Federico II recruited Brussels weaver Nicolas Karcher**, who had been active at the court of Ferrara since about 1517. Karcher worked for him and then for Cardinal Ercole until October 1545 when he moved to Florence at the invitation of the Medici. At the end of 1553 he returned to Mantua, where he stayed until his death in 1562. Some of his tapestries appear in the exhibition. The Gonzaga also employed other workshops, such as the **Medici tapestry factory in Florence**, for a tapestry of Jason, and a Parisian workshop for a set of religious tapestries for the Cathedral of Mantua.

A systematic study of the Gonzaga tapestry collection began in 1977. The Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire in Brussels purchased a large tapestry showing a classical-style triumphal procession bearing the inscription *Fructus Belli*. Art historian and curator of the museum, **Guy Delmarcel**, reconstructed the link to the Ferrante Gonzaga collection and later discovered the rest of the cycle in England and France.

Equally significant is the discovery by experts at the Louvre of cartoons used by the tapestry weavers of Brussels for the above cycle. The Louvre contacted **Clifford Brown**, professor at Ottawa and a Gonzaga specialist. For many years Brown studied the documents concerning the tapestries and succeeded in identifying various still-existing tapestries rediscovered by Delmarcel. Some of

these bear the Gonzaga crest, such as the already-mentioned *Fructus Belli* set and the *Giochi di putti* housed in Lisbon. The studies resulted in a monographic work published by the College Art Association of America in 1996 which has served as the basis for the exhibition at Palazzo Te. Translated into Italian by the **Centro Internazionale d'Arte e di Cultura di Palazzo Te**, the work will constitute part of a book to be published by **Skira**. The work will also comprise subsequent fascinating discoveries by **Nello Forti Grazzini, Stefano L'Occaso and Lucia Meoni**. Skira also intends to publish a guide to the exhibition which will include **The Acts of the Apostles** cycle from the Ducal Palace in Mantua as well as the pieces at Palazzo Te and the Museo Diocesano.

Mantua currently owns **eighteen tapestries** commissioned by the Gonzaga: the **nine tapestries of the Acts of the Apostles**, copies of the Sistine Chapel set made from **Raphael's** cartoons. These were bought by Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga and given to the Palatine basilica of Santa Barbara. Nowadays they are in the Ducal Palace; the **three Millefiori** belonging to Isabella d'Este and **six episodes of the Life of Christ**, bequeathed by bishop Francesco Gonzaga in 1598, today in the Museo Diocesano. **But most of the collection, fifty-two pieces, is scattered elsewhere in Italy** (Milan, Monselice, Trissino and Palermo) and abroad (France, Belgium, Britain, Germany, Portugal and the US). **The exhibition**, mounted by **Roberto Soggia** with **COPRAT** in the rooms of the Napoleonic wing of Palazzo Te and the Fruttieri **includes thirty-four tapestries** among which are **some exceptional masterpieces**: the famous **Chicago Annunciation** (1470-71 circa), the oldest surviving Renaissance style tapestry, which celebrates Andrea Mantegna's Bridal Chamber at the Ducal Palace. It was woven for Ludivico II and used to decorate the pulpit in the Cathedral of Mantua; one of the **Millefiori** cycle, from the **Palazzo Vescovile of Mantua**, restored especially for the exhibition; examples from different sets of **Giochi di Putti**: a complete cycle belonging to the Fondazione Progetto Marzotto at Trissino, a tapestry from Galleria Raffaele Verolino in Modena with **a preparatory drawing by Giulio Romano and workshop from the Uffizi**, and one today in the **Gulbenkian Museum of Lisbon**; three tapestries of the famous **Fructus Belli** set from Brussels and Ecouen; eight tapestries with the **Life of Moses**, of which four from the **Centre des Monuments Nationaux di Châteaudun** in France, and four from the Museo del **Duomo di Milano**; the magnificent tapestry of the **Story of Jason**, with the arms of Alfonso I Gonzaga of Novellara, dated 1554 and bought in 2003 by the Comune of Novellara. It was **woven in Florence at the Arazzeria Medicea (Medici Tapestry factory)** founded by Flemings **Rost and Karcher** and shows how even the cadet branches of the families were interested in this aristocratic form of art; an almost unknown set of four tapestries from the cycle **Cephalus and Procris** restored for the exhibition and originating from the **Musei Vaticani** and from Ecouen; **The meeting between Dido and Aeneas** from the **Civiche Raccolte del Castello Sforzesco** and **Venus appearing to Aeneas** from the **Patrimonio Nacional (Madrid)**; four splendid examples from the **Life of Alexander the Great** (1600 circa) from Monselice (Padua). **The main body of these works was collected by the three brothers apart from The Annunciation, commissioned by Ludovico II, and the Alexander set commissioned by Vincenzo I. The only piece not part of the Gonzaga collection is The miraculous catch of fish by Raphael and his workshop, the original cartoon of which was made by Raphael himself between 1514 and 1516. The tapestry, along with the other nine in the set, was woven at the workshop of Pieter van Aelst of Brussels between 1516 and 1519/21. Now belonging to the Musei Pontifici, it was made to decorate the Sistine Chapel.**

A later version of the whole *Acts of the Apostles* cycle, which includes the

Miraculous Catch of Fish, is on permanent display at the Ducal Palace of Mantua.

At the **Museo Diocesano Francesco Gonzaga of Mantua** there will be a further **six splendid tapestries** from the ***Stories of Christ and the Mantuan*** saints cycle made by Dubout in Paris and three **preparatory drawings** from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and two from the ***Cabinet de dessins of the Louvre***.

As further evidence of the Gonzaga family's interest in these precious works, at Palazzo Te there are documents – including letters, inventories and wills – from the Archivio di Stato di Mantova and Parma (Mantua and Parma state archives) .

Palazzo Te and the Museo Diocesano of Mantua offer us a thrilling journey of discovery through the magnificent tapestries with their colourful silks commissioned by the Gonzaga during the Renaissance. The pieces exhibited are widely representative of the art of tapestry in Europe, whose variety of subjects is equal only to the beauty of their design.

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