

# Collection Significance Report: European Decorative Art & Design: Tapestries

Patricia Collins, March 2008



## About this Document

This document is extracted from a report by Glasgow Museums submitted to the Scottish Executive's Recognition Committee as part of its recognition scheme for non-national collections.

## Overview

Tapestries are woven textiles made from linen, wool, silk and occasionally precious metal threads, which generally incorporate figural or decorative designs within their actual fabric. The heyday of tapestry manufacture in Europe lasted until the eighteenth century, but a few workshops and individual weavers have continued the tradition up to the present day.

## Collection Size

Approx. 200 tapestries.

## The Collection

The largest group of tapestries, both in scale and number, are medieval works made in France and the Spanish Netherlands. There are also medieval tapestries from England, Germany and Switzerland. The size of individual tapestries varies from small fragments to very large wall-covering scale.

The medieval tapestries in the collection were nearly all gifted by Sir William Burrell. The earliest tapestry is German in origin, and dates from the early fourteenth century, and the latest one, made in France, from about 1800. Almost all other tapestries in Burrell's collection were made between the late fifteenth and mid sixteenth century. Among the many stars of his collection are fragments from the famous *Apocalypse of Angers*, and five fragments from the *Seven Sacraments* tapestry.

There are just a few seventeenth century tapestries in the collection, purchased by Burrell for the Provand's Lordship Society. A few contemporary British pieces have also been acquired more recently. One of these, *The Hidden Heart*, was commissioned from a weaver, Lynne Curran, who has been much influenced by Burrell's collection of medieval tapestries.

## Collection Significance

This collection is one of the major tapestry collections in the world. Its main strengths are its outstanding quality and the wide range of dates, subject-matter and areas of origin. Only the Royal Collection, the National Trust and the V&A hold comparably important collections of tapestry in the UK. These tapestries are of interest both in their own right (encompassing e.g. their provenance, technique and iconography), and as potential documentary sources for the study of related subjects such as arms and armour, costume and social history.

The tapestries which have for a long time been attributed to English manufacturers (previously known as the 'Sheldon' group) are the largest single group of such pieces to be found anywhere in the world. Notable items in this collection include *The Luttrell Table Carpet* and a pair of magnificent heraldic tapestries depicting the arms of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester.

The Swiss and German tapestries are also outstanding in terms of both their range of subject-matter and variety of locally-differing styles and techniques. Particularly interesting pieces include the earliest tapestry in the collection, an extremely rare fragment depicting stylized *Birds and Beasts*, made in South Germany in the early fourteenth century. Several purpose-made altar frontals featuring religious iconography include an extremely fine *Death of the Virgin*. In stark contrast are two humorous satirical scenes from Basle, Switzerland. These are based on popular prints of the period and intended for domestic decoration. They depict *The Bustling Housewife* and *The Dishonest Miller*. Another Swiss tapestry from the mid fifteenth century, *The Fox Preaching to the Geese*, is an allegorical subject which can only be interpreted as contemporary criticism of the Roman Catholic Church.

By comparison, the generally larger tapestries from France, Flanders and the Spanish Netherlands in the collection are often single items from larger sets made for aristocratic patrons. For example, the scene known as *Peasants Hunting Rabbits with Ferrets* is part of a set. Other parts of what is probably the same set can be seen in Paris (the Louvre) and San Francisco (M. H. de Young Museum). Among other major pieces, the magnificent *Hercules Initiating the Olympic Games* - although nominally a classical subject - most probably depicts the ruling Duke and other members of the Burgundian Court. Of the grandest tapestries in the collection, two pieces *The Triumph of Faith* and *The Triumph of Divine Love* are high-quality variants of a very famous series known as *Los Honores*, which is to be found in the Spanish Royal Collection. *The Coronation of the Virgin*, another of the most impressive tapestries in the collection, almost certainly once belonged to Henry VIII's close advisor, Cardinal Wolsey.

A major research project to study the Burrell tapestries is currently being planned with the aim of producing the definitive scholarly catalogue of the collection.



## Bibliography

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