



*Fête aux Tuileries en l'honneur des ambassadeurs polonais (Polish Ambassadors). Brussels tapestry, unidentified atelier, c. 1576.
Wool, silk, silver and silver gilt (gold-plated silver), 388 x 480 cm. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York.*

RESTORATION OF
**CATHERINE
DE MEDICI'S**



PRICELESS
**VALOIS
TAPESTRIES**

BY JANA SOELDNER DANGER

“The eight sixteenth-century tapestries representing Catherine de Medici and her family observing courtly festivities, collectively known as The Valois Tapestries, are amongst the most important Renaissance tapestries surviving today,” said Elizabeth Cleland, Associate Curator, Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. “Probably springing from the imagination of the celebrated court artist at Fontainebleau, Antoine Caron, the tapestries were certainly created in Brussels, the most admired weaving center in the sixteenth century. Their designs enjoy a cleverly playful spatial complexity, uniting distant panoramas with figures so close to the picture plane, and so carefully observed, that they seem to inhabit the actual rather than the woven realm. In these tapestries, the subtle twist of a head or sight-line of a glance, balances the bombast of spectacle viewed from afar. In their subject matter, The Valois Tapestries capture the pageantry and excess of the French court; amongst the protagonists depicted is a veritable portrait gallery of the royal family of France. Their monumental scale (each piece over 14 square metres) epitomizes this monumental art form at its most audacious. Woven only once, this is the unique edition of this extraordinary series.”

CATHERINE DE MEDICI

She was married at the age of 14 to a man who largely ignored her, instead showering favors and attention on his mistress. As a result of that marriage, however, she became queen of France during a time of complex political alliances. And after her husband died of complications from a jousting match, she wore widows' weeds for the rest of her life.

Infertility plagued her for years, but eventually she gave birth to 10 children. Three of them became kings who reigned in an era of civil and religious warfare. They looked to her for policy and decision-making, giving her enormous political power. But it also earned her blame for ruthless persecutions carried out during those reigns, including a week-long slaughter of thousands of Huguenots, or French protestants.

A FASCINATING FIGURE

Catherine de Medici is a fascinating historical figure, and a celebrated and precious tapestry series, part of the Uffizi Gallery collection in Florence, Italy, which offers a glimpse of the world in which she lived. The eight Valois Tapestries, woven with wool and silver gilt (gold-plated silver) threads, depict feasts Catherine held at her French court between the years of 1564 and 1573 when the Renaissance was in full bloom, as well as other entertainment festivities. In seven of the eight tapestries, Catherine is shown in her black mourning gowns.

Historians believe Catherine commissioned the tapestries to present to her granddaughter, Christina of Lorraine, as a dowry when the girl married the Grand Duke Ferdinando de Medici, said Maria Vittoria Colonna Rimbotti, president of Friends of the Uffizi in Florence. It is fortunate that the tapestries were taken to Italy, because it prevented them from almost certain destruction during the violence of the French Revolution, she added. “France lost so much art during the revolution. But because these had gone to Florence, they were protected.”

THE FRIENDS

Friends of the Uffizi Gallery is a support group organized in 1993 following a terrorist bombing that damaged the gallery and some of its precious artworks, Contessa Rimbotti said. The goal of the group, as well as a Palm Beach-based sister organization in the U.S. established in 2006, is to restore and maintain the museum's artistic heritage. Although the current project is restoration of The Valois Tapestries, past projects have included several of the gallery's marble statues, said Diann Scarsvilli, chair of Friends of the Uffizi Gallery Advisory Board.

The Valois Tapestries hung continuously for almost a hundred years – first in the Crocetta Palace and then in the Uffizi. But they have not been in public view since 1987, when they were removed from the gallery, carefully rolled up and placed in protective storage.

The restoration of one of the tapestries, the Bayonne Joust, is already complete. It depicts Catherine watching the jousting competition from a balcony with her daughter Elizabeth. Work on three others is under way, and four are still waiting.

HISTORY AND BEAUTY

The tapestries are important for both their beauty and their historical value, said Contessa Rimbotti, who once gave tours

in the corridor where they hung. “Our culture has its roots in the Renaissance, and they tell its story,” she said. “We see in them the fashion and dress of the period and what court behavior was like. They're a very important part of history.”

Lisa Marie Browne, executive director of Friends of the Uffizi Gallery, agreed. “The Valois Tapestries and the Medici collection in total are important to all of humanity,” she said. “The Renaissance was the birth of our culture. The Medicis were patrons of the arts back in the 1300s, and today, patrons of the arts in Palm Beach are continuing the Medicis' legacy.”

A METICULOUS PROCESS

As restorers clean the tapestries, the brilliant colors that were muted by light and dirt once again become apparent. “I was

“THE RENAISSANCE WAS THE BIRTH OF OUR CULTURE. THE MEDICIS WERE PATRONS OF THE ARTS BACK IN THE 1300s, AND TODAY, PATRONS OF THE ARTS IN PALM BEACH ARE CONTINUING THE MEDICIS' LEGACY.”

— Lisa Marie Browne, executive director of Friends of the Uffizi Gallery



Attaque de Vue devant le château de Fontainebleau (Fontainebleau) Brussels tapestry, unidentified atelier, c. 1576. Wool, silk, silver and silver gilt (gold-plated silver), 404x344 cm. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York

astonished at their vividness,” Contessa Rimbotti said.

Restoring the tapestries is a painstaking and complicated process, partly because the different dyes used on the threads react differently to products and methods, Contessa Rimbotti said. The work begins with a careful vacuuming.

“Then the tapestry is put on a table,” Contessa Rimbotti continued. “The restorers sit next to each other, and each one works on just 30 centimeters of the material using a cotton ball soaked in a special liquid. Then the liquid is blotted with absorbent paper. It's a very long job that takes months.”

The art captures the human spirit, Contessa Rimbotti said. “When we see the people in the tapestries, the dress is different, but they are our past, and we come from them. We are a continuum, and we are all part of the culture of the Renaissance.” ●