

THE PLAIN DEALER

Delicate work: Raising a 'Renaissance Splendor' tapestry at Cleveland Museum of Art

By: Steven Litt

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Art handlers raise a Valois tapestry at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

CLEVELAND, Ohio – With the gentle swoosh of fabric sliding across a plastic sheet, art handlers at the Cleveland Museum of Art hauled on slender ropes Friday morning to lift a rare, Renaissance-era tapestry into position on a gallery wall.

It was the sixth and final tapestry installed for the museum’s upcoming exhibition, “Renaissance Splendor: Catherine de’ Medici’s Valois Tapestries,” opening Sunday, Nov. 18.

“Ready: lift,” said installation specialist Barry Austin, and four other art handlers pulled gently and evenly, one arm length at a time, before pausing and waiting for the next command.

The art handlers’ ropes traveled through small pulleys mounted high on the wall, raising a plywood batten fastened with strips of Velcro to a special “backing fabric” mounted behind the tapestry.

“Ready: lift,” Austin said again. When the handlers lifted the top edge of the tapestry, its bottom slid forward across a protective sheet of plastic on the floor until it finally hung free on the wall.

For Alessandra Griffo, curator of 18th-century art at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy, the installation was a moment of relief and revelation.

Relief because handling something as old and delicate as a 16th-century Flemish tapestry is always a nervous-making moment, she said.

And, revelation, because it was the first time in decades, or perhaps centuries, that a half dozen of the Valois tapestries have been displayed in the same place at the same time.

“Probably only the Medici’s have seen them all together,” Griffo said.

Catherine de’ Medici, queen of France, commissioned the tapestries in Brussels to celebrate the Valois dynasty, the royal line into which she married at age 14 after having grown up in Florence and Rome in one of Italy’s wealthiest and most powerful families.

The hangings, which measure as much as 12 feet high and 15 feet across, and weigh 100 lbs. or more, depict extravagant palace festivals, or “magnificences,” organized by de’ Medici to convey the power of the Valois court to visiting dignitaries from other courts or to rival factions in France.

In 1589, the year she died, Catherine had the tapestries sent from Paris to Florence, accompanying her granddaughter, Christina of Lorraine, who had married Ferdinand I de’ Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany.

Griffo and Marjorie E. “Betsy” Wieseman, the Cleveland museum’s curator of European art, said it’s not known where the tapestries were displayed in the Pitti Palace in Florence, the Medici seat.

But they said that since the 19th century, the hangings have been shown only rarely because of their delicacy and light sensitivity.

Renaissance tapestries exposed to daylight for long periods tend to look blanched because ultraviolet rays fade fabric dyes.

Made of wool, silk and threads wrapped in silver and gold, the six tapestries are part of a series of eight. They were recently conserved and repaired, in a project funded by the American Friends of the Uffizi.

The museum’s show grew out of conversations two years ago between William Griswold, director of the Cleveland museum, and Eike Schmidt, director of the Uffizi, Griffo and Wieseman said.

Griffo said that when the tapestries return to Italy, they may not be shown again for five years or more, given their fragility.

“They are not human, but they are living beings,” she said. “The fabric it is so delicate.”

So how did she feel about the installation on Friday?

“Everything was perfect,” she said, “perfectly done.”