

THE PLAIN DEALER

Propaganda and power pervade Valois renaissance tapestries at Cleveland Museum of Art

By: Steven Litt
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A detail of "Elephant", from the Valois Tapestries, c. 1576. The tapestry is part of the new exhibit called "Renaissance Splendor: Catherine de' Medici's Valois Tapestries", in partnership with Gallerie degli Uffizi. Lisa DeJong/The Plain Dealer

CLEVELAND, Ohio – *Ho hum*, you might say. After this summer’s hugely popular summer exhibition on the “Infinity Rooms” of Yayoi Kusama, the Cleveland Museum of Art is making renaissance tapestries the focus of its major fall-winter show, which opens today.

Tapestries rarely get star treatment in major museum exhibitions, in part because they’re big, hard to handle and expensive to move around.

Then too, tapestries might seem to have less box office appeal than, say, Impressionist paintings, Egyptian mummies or mirror rooms by a certain contemporary Japanese artist.

As it turns out, “Renaissance Splendor,” which focuses on six tapestries probably commissioned in the mid-1570s by Catherine de’ Medici, queen mother of France, is sumptuous and dazzling.

And, like other exhibitions at the museum that have explored the unusual and the unfamiliar – think of the revelatory shows on the Wari culture of ancient Peru, or on art inspired by yoga – “Splendor” is a mind-expanding experience.

The freshly restored tapestries were very likely intended by de’ Medici as propaganda to display her power and wealth to conflicting royal factions and visiting potentates.

The enormous hangings, which measure 12 feet high and 15 feet or more in width, depict elaborate festivals, mock battles and other “magnificences” staged by Catherine to divert and amuse visiting dignitaries and warring factions in the turbulent Valois court.

Those events include jousting tournaments, a battle with fireworks exploding from atop an elephant, a skirmish between sailors and a monstrous whale and an elaborate reception for a diplomatic delegation from Poland.

Displayed at eye level instead of high up on a palace wall, the tapestries invite viewers to stand back and imbibe their grandeur.

You can also zoom in close to see details like monkey musicians cavorting on a decorative fringe, a pair of dogs fighting, or the exploding bombs used to frighten horses and test the abilities of their riders during the Valois spectacles.

The tapestries are on loan from the Uffizi Galleries in Florence, one of the greatest museums in the world, home to Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus,” and “Primavera,” and other mainstay masterpieces of Western art.

Shown on rare occasions one or two at a time at the Uffizi, the six tapestries are being exhibited together in Cleveland for the first time, possibly in centuries.

The American Friends of the Uffizi funded a three-year project in which conservators repaired, painstakingly cleaned and documented the hangings, part of a set of eight. A film that accompanies the exhibition provides a glimpse of the daunting complexity of the restorations.

The tapestries are making their joint debut in Cleveland thanks to conversations that started two years ago between William Griswold, director of the Cleveland museum, and Eike Schmidt, director of the Uffizi.

Co-organized by the two museums and the Italian Ministry of Culture, the show sets the tapestries amid portrait paintings, decorative objects and drawings that provide a taste of life in the lavish but financially precarious Valois court.

As the main royal power in those years, Catherine would seem to have enjoyed a life of privilege and influence. Her life hardly sounds enviable, however.

Born in 1519 in Florence, she was the daughter of Lorenzo de’ Medici and Madeleine de La Tour d’Auvergne, a princess related to French nobility. Both died within days of Catherine’s birth, rendering her an instant orphan.

Her uncle, Pope Clement VII had her raised by nuns in Florence and Rome, and then married her off at age 14 to Henry II of France, who vastly preferred spending his nights with his mistress, the noblewoman Diane de Poitiers.

In her book, "The Rival Queens," author Nancy Goldstone describes Catherine as a plain and unloved bride valued principally by the Valois royals for her ample Medici dowry.

Even so, Henry and Catherine produced 10 children, of whom seven survived to adulthood. A family tree in the exhibition's first room outlines the complicated line of succession that followed Henry II's death after being speared in the eye during a 1559 jousting tournament.

In the decades that followed, Catherine functioned as the influential regent and queen mother as her three oldest sons, one by one, assumed the throne during a time of violent strife between Catholics and Huguenots in France.

While building and decorating palaces, Catherine accumulated debts estimated at \$100 million at the time of her death, according to an essay in the show's catalogue by Marjorie "Betsy" Wieseman, the Cleveland museum's curator of European painting and sculpture.

Catherine's taste for luxury is suggested by a 1546 gilded, rock crystal platter engraved with an image of Noah's Ark by Italian artist and gem engraver, Giovanni Bernardi.

It was one of the valuable items brought to Florence from France, including the Valois tapestries, by Christina of Lorraine, Catherine's favorite granddaughter.

Also on view are exquisite portrait drawings of members of the Valois court, which served as direct guides for portraits woven into the tapestries on view.

For instance, portrait drawings of Henry III and his bride, Louise de Lorraine-Vaudemont, are mounted on a stand directly in front of a tapestry depicting the couple in the foreground at a naval spectacle staged at the Fontainebleau chateau.

Other drawings in the exhibition show how court artists provided overall compositions for the tapestries, which were later elaborated by the weavers in Brussels.

Among other things, the weavers used threads wrapped in gilded silver and other metals to evoke shimmering embroidery on leggings and other garments worn by courtiers in the tapestries.

Catherine de' Medici appears and reappears in "Where's Waldo?" fashion, up close and far away, as a powerful authority figure presiding over the festivities. She's always dressed in black, a reference to customs for widows in her native Italy, according to Goldstone.

By combining preparatory drawings with the finished tapestries, the exhibition underscores the consummate artistry of the Flemish weavers who created them.

The show also calls fresh attention to tapestries in the Cleveland museum's permanent collection, including the brilliantly colorful Chaumont tapestries on view on the lower level of the museum's 1916 building.

Interestingly, according to Goldstone, Henry II forced Chaumont palace as a gift upon Catherine, while bestowing the far more desirable palace of Chenonceaux on Diane de Poitiers.

As soon as Henry II died of his jousting wound, Catherine appropriated Chenonceaux and forced her rival to accept Chaumont in its place. *So there!*

That juicy tidbit is one of the subtler ways in which the Uffizi tapestries resonate with the Cleveland collection and illuminate the interplay of power, property and love in the renaissance.

REVIEW

What's up: "Renaissance Splendor: Catherine de' Medici's Valois Tapestries."

Venue: The Cleveland Museum of Art

Where: 11150 East Blvd., Cleveland.

When: Today through Monday, Jan. 21.

Admission: \$15 timed single-admission tickets; \$25 timed tickets include admission to "Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern," opening Friday, Nov. 23. Call 216-421-7340 or go to clevelandart.org.