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THE ROYAL
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Tapestry in the Round. Workshop I: Materials

The first in a series of three research workshops was held at The Burrell Museum in Glasgow on Friday 30 November 2012, bringing together a total of 17 conservation specialists, art historians, curators, weavers and historians from the UK, Spain and Belgium. The theme of this workshop was new directions in tapestry research, specifically in the field of **materials**. The day was structured around 4 main presentations and free discussion, and included the physical inspection of Burrell tapestries currently undergoing analysis or assessment work.

Patricia Collins (The Burrell Collection) presented the host institution's world-class collection of Gothic tapestries, and in particular the work that has been carried out on these materials as part of the Burrell's catalogue project, ongoing since 2009. The possibilities and limitations of UV photography, carbon dating and dye analysis in the examination of the materials were presented and discussed, and in particular the benefits of the use of raking light to inspect design and execution were emphasised. This relatively simple technology produced unexpectedly revealing relief images bringing out three-dimensional aspects of tapestry design, for example in the representation of human faces in late medieval tapestries from the Low Countries. Discussion then moved to evidence of the effects of use, repair and cleaning upon the materials, and how best these might be understood and presented to lay audiences. The limited scope for inspection of materials in these respects caused by the lining of the rear of tapestries was noted, and the possibilities of inserting 'windows' in the lining to display the effects of use, repair and cleaning upon the fabric elements were explained. The use of modern materials to repair original fabric was often a source of damage to the structure of the tapestry, given the inherent resilience of newer materials and the strain this placed on surrounding older threads.

Peter Stabel (Antwerp University) considered materials in relation to the manufacturing centres and industrial production of the Low Countries in the late medieval and early modern periods. He argued that tapestry production was not a well-established large-scale luxury industry. It was reliant on a small number of entrepreneurs with easy access to networks of supply for (luxury) materials, cash to employ a workforce, and connections to the artistic milieu necessary for tapestry design. The manufacture of tapestries was not located within a strong guild context: tapestry guilds, where they existed, were small in membership, and often part of larger guilds. Their statutes hardly mention materials at all, possibly because these came via commissioning entrepreneurs, and even the ownership of looms seems to have been limited among the masters. Instead, the industry was built around the availability of a large scale, relatively unskilled and possibly quite mobile work force which could be hired for cash, and which was the by-product of the cloth industry. It was acknowledged that these findings needed to be tested, where possible, against evidence from the centres of production which are currently thought to

have been industry leaders (Tournai, Arras), and that the single-word 'tapestry' might cover a wide range of material realities, allowing for different industrial processes and relations. In this paper, reflection on materials opened out on to wider social and economic relations.

Anita Quye (Glasgow University) discussed dyes and threads used in tapestries, with a particular emphasis on how these subjects can help inform decisions taken about conservation and display. Commonly, as recent research reveals, seven or eight core dyes are to be found in tapestries, but these can produce a vast palette of colours, perhaps as many as 600, many of which were the (less durable) yellows and greens. The most durable colours were reds and blues, with the proviso that reds, generally produced from acidic rather than alkaline dye baths, produced weaker areas within the finished object. Other factors relating to threads and the strength or weakness of tapestries were discussed, including metal thread, which greatly added to the weight of the object, and silk, which could produce weak spots. Silk was often used in skies in figurative tapestries, with the unfortunate effect that weak areas existed in the top third of the tapestry. Discussion of the location of the expensive metal threads and most intricate designs then followed, with participants noting the intention that the detailed/expensive work in the finished product should, if properly hung, emerge at eye-level. Tapestry hanging was a specialised role at the Burgundian court, and it was felt that tapestries are commonly hung too high in modern displays (with the caveat that in churches, tapestries were indeed commonly hung high). Detailed discussion of the raw materials used to produce dyes (madder, weld, greenweed, orchil, brazilwood among others) also followed, including the importance of some of these as industrial crops in late medieval Flanders.

Katherine Wilson (Chester University) focused on documentary records of the transport, hanging and repair of tapestries in the Low Countries in the late Middle Ages. Strikingly, some of the documentation generated by owners can be far more precise regarding the nature and provenance of materials used in tapestry fabrication than any associated with the initial production process. Repair was clearly the work of specialists who may also have been involved in the production of tapestry. Once again, the diverse range of material realities covered by the contemporary term 'tapestry' was acknowledged, emphasising the difficulties attaching to the use of documentary sources. It was acknowledged that the quality of wool used may not have been a key issue in tapestry production, and indeed studies of the fleeces appearing in tapestry threads are few and far between.

To conclude, the participants divided into smaller groups to deepen the discussion and report back in plenary session. It was agreed that the chronological and geographical focus of the workshops could be usefully extended beyond the primarily late medieval Flemish examples that were frequently cited in papers and in discussion, and that in this workshop, as in those that follow, participants could usefully focus closely on contemporary terminology used to describe materials, roles and processes, as the diversity apparent in each is considerable. Feedback forms were completed, and the comments will be used in the organisation of the next workshop on 22 March 2013.

List of participants

Klare Alen (Leuven University), Francesca Baseby (Edinburgh University/Dovecot Studios), Koenraad Brosens (Leuven University), Jonathan Cleaver (Dovecot Studios), Patricia Collins (Glasgow Museums), Philippa Duffus (Manchester University), Lesley Fraser (Edinburgh University), Ian Gibb (Historic Royal Palaces), Concha Herero Carretero (Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid), Helen Murdina Hughes (Glasgow Museums), Frances Lennard (Glasgow University), Anita Quye (Glasgow University), Philippa Sanders (National Trust), Astrid Slegten (Leuven University), Graeme Small (Durham University), Peter Stabel (Antwerp University), Katherine Wilson (Chester University), Helen Wyld (National Trust).