

Grand Design: Pieter Coecke van Aelst and Renaissance Tapestry. Elizabeth Cleland, ed.

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Following the outstanding *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence* and *Tapestry in the Baroque: Threads of Splendor*, published, respectively, in 2002 and 2007/08, the Metropolitan Museum of Art pursues its vital mission in the study of tapestry with exceptional exhibitions and significant publications. The recent exhibition *Grand Design: Pieter Coecke van Aelst and Renaissance Tapestry* is a new achievement in this field. Its impressive catalogue is the result of the collaboration between its curators Elizabeth Cleland, Maryan Ainsworth, Stijn Alsteens, Nadine Orenstein, and many tapestry specialists (Iain Buchanan, Guy Delmarcel, Nello Forti Grazzini, Concha Herrero Carretero, Lorraine Karafel, Sarah Mallory, Lucia Meoni, Cecilia Paredes, and Katja Schmitz-von Ledebur).

One of the most famous artists of his generation, Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502–50) played a significant role in the artistic developments of the Northern Renaissance. Along with Bernard van Orley (1487–1541) and Michiel Coxie (1499–1592), he was indeed an important tapestry designer in the Southern Netherlands. In Antwerp, his activity also included panel painting, editing and publishing architectural treatises, and designs for stained glass, goldsmiths' works, and prints. Much remains to be done to better understand his production as tapestry designer. *Grand Design* rectifies this situation. The volume is also the first monograph

devoted to the Flemish master since Marlier's publication (Georges Marlier, *La Renaissance Flamande: Pierre Coecke d'Alost* [1966]).

After a discerning introduction by Cleland and a helpful timeline, Ainsworth discusses Pieter Coecke's panel painting; Mallory, the three stages of tapestry production; and Alsteens, his preparatory drawings for tapestries. Subsequent essays are devoted to a representative number of magnificent tapestries, following the division that Thomas P. Campbell adopted in 2002: each section includes an essay focused on iconography and design, dating and attribution, genesis, chronology, and influence of the series, followed by in-depth catalogue entries. While *petits patrons* (drawn designs), full-scale painted cartoons, and tapestries are systematically and thoroughly examined, the volume also offers a glimpse into other media.

Delmarcel delivers a brilliant discussion of the *Life of Saint Paul*, the first of Coecke's tapestry series. This series was manifestly inspired by Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles* and by Giulio Romano's *Deeds and Triumphs of Scipio*. Coecke was clearly interested in Italian innovative designs in his tapestry projects, but the artist's debt to Italians' compositions was perfectly internalized and expressed in his distinctive personal style. His mannerist style was nurtured through trips he made to the Italian Peninsula and to Constantinople. The painter's journey in Turkey is illustrated by the fascinating woodcut frieze of the *Customs and Fashions of the Turks*, published by his widow after his death, based on Coecke's lost designs intended for an unrealized tapestry series (Orenstein).

The *Life of Saint Paul*, the *Seven Deadly Sins* (Cleland), and the *Story of Joshua* (Buchanan) should undoubtedly be attributed to the painter. Other attributions are soundly based on each work's style. However, the *Life of Abraham* (Cleland) raises some doubts. This series is closely related to Michiel Coxcié's style, and a collaborative process cannot be excluded. Also, many questions remain unanswered regarding Coecke's role in the creation of certain series, especially the *Story of Julius Caesar* (Karafel) and the *Story of Tobias* (Alsteens). A different visual language dominated Coecke's later career, which is evident in the *Story of Vertumnus and Pomona* (Cleland), the *Triumph of Mordecai* (Alsteens), the *Poesia* (Paredes), and the *Story of the Creation* (Meoni). Some other series, such as the *Story of Cupid and Psyche* (Mobilier national, France), which are not discussed in this volume, deserve further study and should be reexamined with this new perspective. The last two essays tackle an essential challenge: the *Conquest of Tunis*, discussed here as a possible collaborative project between Coecke and the court painter Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen (Buchanan), and the *Verdures with Animals*, which may have been designed by Jan Tons the Younger (Forti Grazzini).

Overall, the exhibition and the volume highlight the important contribution made by a key artist to the stylistic development of high-quality tapestry designs in the Netherlands. The book provides a long-overdue reassessment of Coecke's achievement and, above all, restores tapestry, the most important figurative art during the Renaissance, to its rightful role.

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