

The Tapestries at St John's Conventual Church – Spirituality and Exuberance

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When the Aragonese Grand Master Ramon y Perellos ordered the set of tapestries for the Knights Conventual Church,¹ he intended to convey the supremacy of the Catholic faith in whose name the knights had battled for centuries and the exuberance of his reign for which he would be remembered.² Being the newly elected Grand Master in 1697, he was obliged according to the statutes of the Order to give a gift called a 'gioia' within the first five years of his magistracy.³ Together with this set, he also ordered another set *Tenture des Indes* for the Grand

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- 1 For more literature on the St John's tapestries see: Alfred Darcel, *Rapport sur les Tapesseries de Eglise de S. Jean de Malta*. (Malta, 1883); F.V. Inglott, *The Flemish Tapestries of the Church of The Grand Masters*. (Malta, 1912); Hannibal Scicluna, *The Church of St John in Valletta*. (Rome, 1955); Madeleine Jarry, *Report on the state of the Tapestries at Valletta*. (Malta, 1957) and *New Testament Tapestries in St John's, Malta: Triumphs' after Rubens*. In *The Burlington Magazine*, 1960; Guy Delmarcel, *The Rubens Tapestry set in Valletta Malta: Some new facts and documents*. In *The Ringling Museum of Art Journal* (Sarasota, 1982); *Nieuwe Gegevens Over de Wandtapijten van het Nieuwe Testament door Judocus de Vos te Malta*. (Belgium, 1985); *Rubens Tapestries in Malta*. In *Rubens's Textiles*. (Belgium, 1997).
 - 2 The Knights Hospitallers of the Order of St John had intended their conventual church dedicated to St John the Baptist to be the largest and most outstanding church in Malta as it was to represent every facet of the Order's character. The absolute head of the Order was the Grand Master who was elected for life; he was Master of the Order and bore the titles of 'Serene Highness' and 'Eminence'.
 - 3 Scicluna, *The Church of St John*, p. 189; Codice dell'Ordine, Statutes XXIII, XXIV and XXV, Ed. Ordini C.23, 24.

Master's Palace from the Gobelin weavers in France.

The set for St John's consists of twenty-nine pieces measuring 610 cm in height. Fourteen pieces measure approximately 670 cm in width, eight depict new testament scenes from the life of Christ; *The Annunciation, The Adoration of the Shepherds, The Adoration of the Magi, The Entry to Jerusalem, The Last Supper, The Crucifixion, The Resurrection* and one depicting *The Four Evangelists*. The other six tapestries depict triumphal allegorical representations of the Eucharist which had become the fundamental principles of the Catholic Church that emerged after the Council of Trent, these are; *The Institution of the Eucharist, Triumph of Faith, Triumph of Charity, Triumph of the Catholic Church, Triumph of Truth unveiled by Time, and Triumph of the Eucharist over Idolatry*. The tapestries bear the Grand Master's coat of arms, the Brussels city mark and the name of the weaver Judocus de Vos, a leading late seventeenth century Brussels workshop and contractor.⁴ They were woven between 1699 and 1701, and their arrival registered in the records of the Order on 7 February 1702.⁵

The triumphal series and *The Four Evangelists* were based largely on the cartoons,⁶ Peter Paul Rubens had been commissioned to create between 1622-28 by the Archduchess Infanta Isabella for a set of twenty tapestries for her favoured convent of the Barefoot Carmelites in Madrid woven by Jan Raes I. Considering that the Triumphs set had been produced more than once by other weavers such as Frans Van den Hecke⁷ and other weavers, testifies that the objective of the Grand

4 Judocus the Vos was described in the Naulaerts Register in Antwerp as a contractor who passed on commissions to other manufactures see, Jarry, *New Testament Tapestries*, 151; Delmarcel 1997, p.137; he was registered in the Brussels corporation, see Koenraad Brosens, *Revisiting Brussels Tapestry, 1700-1740: New Data on Tapissiers Albert Auwercx and Judocus de Vos*. In *Textile History* 43, (2012), 189.

5 N(ational) L(ibrary) M(alta), Arch. 134, f. 156v; entered under the date 7 February 1701 *ab Incarnatione*, the new year began according to the liturgical therefore from January to March 25 was still 1701. Thus according to modern computation it was the year 1702; Inglott, *The Flemish Tapestries*, 7; Scicluna, *The Church of St John*, 189; Jarry, *Report on the State of the Tapestries*, 5.

6 Nora De Poorter, *The Triumph of the Eucharist*. In *Rubens Tapestries in Malta in Rubens's Textiles*, 1997. Some of the cartoons still exist in the Prado Museum, Madrid and the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota.

7 A renowned weaver in Brussels, his son Jan Frans repeated the series on a number

Master's gift was not originality but the representation of the triumphs themselves as affirmation of the Order's devotion to the Catholic faith. The original Rubens cartoons belonged to Van den Hecke's weaving house and would not have been available to De Vos. The weaver thus engaged a Brussels painter to create the necessary cartoons borrowing largely from Rubens creations. Guy Delmarcel suggested the painter Louis Van Schoor and Jan Van Orley both well established cartoon painters in that period, particularly, Jan Van Orley who was known to have collaborated with Augustin Coppens a landscape artist, both engaged by Judocus de Vos.⁸ Since the St John's tapestries are larger in dimensions than Rubens original scheme the cartoons had to be larger. Thus, the painter took artistic license and freely added to the compositions in keeping with late seventeenth century taste. For instance, the columns in Rubens's original series were replaced by a border that framed the tapestry. In general the compositions have great style and elegance with a palette which is bright and contrasting, several were enhanced with landscapes and greenery showing a concern with nature, reflecting the growing interest in landscape painting toward the mid seventeenth century and thereafter.

The concept and compositions of five of the new Testament scenes tapestries are also indebted to works and engravings created by Rubens⁹; *The Raising of the Cross* recalls Rubens' famous work in Antwerp Cathedral and an engraving by Witdoeck, *The Annunciation*, *The Entry to Jerusalem* possibly based on designs by Louis van Schoor, *The Last Supper* based on Poussin's works of the same subject, whilst the *Resurrection of Christ* based on a painting by Godfried Maes.¹⁰ Jan Van Orley could also be a candidate as he produced a series of *The Life of Christ* for Bruges Cathedral in 1730. Guy Delmarcel observed that the composition of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* was composed from two

of occasions, so did other weavers, examples are those for Cathedral of Toledo, the Palace in Madrid and the Chapter of Cologne. See Jarry, *New Testament Tapestries*, 152; Poorter, *The Triumph of the Eucharist*; Delmarcel, *The Rubens Tapestry*, 93.

8 Delmarcel, *The Rubens Tapestry*, 197 fn.15; *Rubens Tapestries in Malta*, 141; Brosens, *Revisiting Brussels Tapestry*, 183.

9 Delmarcel, *The Rubens Tapestry*, 192-193; Nora De Poorter, *The Eucharist Series*, III (Brussels, 1978), vol. 1., pp. 253-254.

10 Delmarcel, *Rubens Tapestries in Malta*, 138-142.

of Rubens engravings.¹¹ *The Adoration of the Magi* is obviously based on Rubens painting now in Lyons Musee de Beaux Art. The remaining fourteen pieces measuring each 185 cm wide depict the twelve apostles, the Virgin Mary and Christ the Saviour. Another measuring 297 cms wide represents the Grand Master as the donor accompanied by allegorical representations of victory and charity, making the series the largest set of Brussels tapestries and one of the most impressive in the world.

The manner in which they were planned to hang is of particular interest as it reflects the religious dogma of the Counter Reformation, statements of which were obviously still an issue in the late seventeenth century (fig. 1). The six large triumphal pieces that expressed the fundamental truths of the Catholic Church were placed in the sacred presbytery; used only by the clergy, where the mystery of the Eucharist was performed and the sacrament was kept. As a set, the triumphal series illustrate the mystery of Transubstantiation that is believed to be the actual presence of God in the Eucharist – a central theme of the Roman Catholic Church in countering the Reformation. The pieces showing *Triumph of Truth unveiled by Time* and *Triumph of the Eucharist over Idolatry* where symbolically placed closest to the altar the truths of which are supported by *The Institution of the Eucharist*. (fig. 2)

The series depicting the life of Christ was hung in the nave with the congregation and the story of Christ's life unfolded alternately on either side of the nave as a worshipper would progress his journey from the entrance of the church towards the altar. The tapestries were hung once a year to celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi and left in place until the feast of St John the Baptist, the patron saint of the Order. The nave of the church measures 52 meters by 15 meters, ordered specially to line the perimeter - one can only imagine the triumphant scenography and the monumental exuberance of these tapestries as they hung encompassing the worshipper. (fig. 3) The mesmerizing vision was surely not to leave ones mine for some time, the tapestries certainly served their purpose, their exuberant character being both didactic and convincing – salvation through the Eucharist expressed by the life of Jesus Christ.

11 Delmarcel, *The Rubens Tapestry*, 192.

The length of tapestries was determined by the size of the loom, it was the width that was optional and could be ordered to any size, in this case the width of the side chapels. At some stage it was observed that the tapestries intended to hang from the cornice of the nave at a height of approximately twelve meters, would be far too high and the perspective of the scenes would be distorted. Therefore, Judocus de Vos, who unlikely visited Malta, was instructed to add a border consisting of a festoon of fruit and vegetables at the top end corresponding with the frieze of the nave that allowed the tapestries to hang lower down. Since a weaver could produce only slightly more than one square meter of tapestry each month,¹² and considering that the set is more than 700 square meters in area - woven between 1699 and 1701, it would have taken several weavers to complete. Judocus de Vos possessed one of the largest weaving houses in Brussels and said to have owned at lease twelve looms. De Vos is known to have subcontracted to other *tapissiers* and would have had no problem to expedite the work using other looms available to him.¹³

The Grand Master certainly took a personal interest in this order which he had decided upon soon after his election in 1697, setting aside a budget for the tapestries in 1698,¹⁴ and corresponded directly with his Agent General of the Order in The Netherlands Fra Charles Antoine de Fourneau de Cruyckenbourg,¹⁵ between October 1699 and June 1700 regarding the production of the tapestries.¹⁶ In his letter dated 25 October, Fourneau assured the Grand Master that the tapestries will be made to measure correctly according to the plan supplied of the church. He also stated that the weaver was very competent having worked at the Gobelins in Paris under the direction of Charles le Brun. He confirmed

12 <http://ringlingdocents.org/rubens/bozzetti-to-tapestries.htm>. Willem van Osnabrugge, 2012.

13 De Vos is known to have collaborated with Nicolaas Naulaerts in Antwerp between 1700- 1701. see Jarry, *New Testament Tapestries*, 151; Delmarcel, *Rubens Tapestries in Malta*, 37; Brosens, *Revisiting Brussels Tapestry*, 188- 194.

14 Delmarcel, *Nieuwe Gegevens*, 32; NLM, Arch. 1541.

15 Delmarcel, *The Rubens Tapestry*, 193, fn. 11; Fra Charles Antoine de Fourneaud Cruyckenbourg, was born in 1658 and became general agent of the Order in the Netherlands on 4 March 1683. He died in Brussels on 28 February 1729.

16 See the transcribed letters by Delmarcel, *Nieuwe Gegevens*, 42- 44. Original in NLM, Arch. 1228, ff. 7r, 8r, 74r -75v, 119r, 124r-125v.

receiving the instructions to shorten the width of the two last tapestries by 6 *pans*, these were; *The Annunciation* and *The Four Evangelists*.¹⁷ They were effectively reduced in width to fit the portrait of the Grand Master. (fig. 4)

There has been a long tradition attributing the author of the portrait to the Italian artist Mattia Preti who had been resident in Malta since 1661.¹⁸ The possibility is plausible – given that he was the sole authority during the late seventeenth century on any decorative schemes undertaken within the Conventual Church. Yet Preti would have been eighty-four years old when Perellos was elected and had died on 3 January 1699 months before he was in correspondence with Fourneau when the portrait was discussed. In his letter of October 1699 Fourneau stated that his Eminence may use the best brush in Italy but assured him that the tapestry would by far surpass it in quality.

A portrait was certainly sent to Brussels where in his letter dated 30 May 1700, Fourneau informed the Grand Master that he received the portrait and opened it in the presence of Commanders de Fleurigny and de Bachivilliers. However he claimed that it was too large and the letters which formed the inscription had to be in reverse in order to be woven correctly in the tapestry and that the white background they were on was aesthetically not pleasing and that some changes will be made according to the advice of knowledgeable persons and Commander de Fleurigny.¹⁹

On 19 June 1700 Fourneau informed the Grand Master that the portrait was not adequate for producing a tapestry as the painting had to be executed in reverse and - that it was simply 'not good enough'. In the same letter he reassured the Grand Master that he had seen the original contract and that the weaver was being paid 5 florins per *aulne*,²⁰ he also referred to the measurements of the pilasters and the plan of the church which was well drawn and he hoped that there will be no mistakes in the dimensions.²¹ To the two large tapestries, meant to hang above the

17 See Delmarcel, *Nieuwe Gegevens*, 32, 33; *Pan* equals 26 cms. These two tapestries measure 520 cm that is 150 cm less than the rest of the large series.

18 Inglott, *The Flemish Tapestries*, 6; Scicluna, *The Church of St John*, 190.

19 Delmarcel, *Nieuwe Gegevens*, 34; NLM, Arch. 1228, f. 119r.

20 Old measurement 120cm squared.

21 Delmarcel, *The Rubens Tapestry*, 185; NLM, Arch., ff. 124r, 125r.

main door were added the portrait, and then, the Apostles Sts Simon and Thaddeus. The measurements of the tapestries were precise and the pieces planned to hang above the main door extended to fit perfectly around the corner to ensure the complete encompassment of the nave.

The fact that the portrait of the Grand Master included the inscription implies that it was a cartoon created for the tapestry thus further discounting Preti as the author, it is unlikely that other artists on Malta were further engaged.²² The portrait is not discussed again and Fourneau, anxious to please the Grand Master as his letters show, would have had no alternative but to have a cartoon produced in Brussels and the portrait possibly serving only for the true likeness of the Grand Master and finished that year.

The fourteen narrow pieces were ordered and woven last, according to Fourneau's final receipt of the measurements of the pilasters in June 1700.²³ Possibly this decision was taken when it was realized that the plain green marble pilasters in the nave should be completed with images of the apostles as was the tradition in Flemish Cathedrals, the pilasters of which carried sculptures of the apostles. The Cathedral of St Michael in Brussels certainly served as a source of inspiration to the painter of these cartoons²⁴. These tapestries were woven in monochrome of brown and grey wools not only to reflect statuary but also to expedite their manufacture. (Fig. 5)

The entire set of tapestries were near completion by February 1701 according to previously unpublished documents of letters sent to his Eminence by the Grand Prior de Hautefeuille discussing the Grand Master's request for the tapestries to be exempt from customs excise duty in France, and indicated that he was waiting for instructions from Fra Fourneau confirming that the tapestries had not yet left Brussels.²⁵ Apparently, the Grand Master was not granted tax exemption. The correspondence on the subject carried on till August of that year.²⁶ Once matters were cleared, in order to ensure their quick and safe travel

22 Delmarcel, *The Rubens Tapestry*, 197, fn.15; and *Nieuwe Gegevens*, 38.

23 Delmarcel, *The Rubens Tapestry*, 193; *Nieuwe Gegevens*, 43; NLM, Arch. 1228, ff. 124r-125v.

24 See Delmarcel, *The Rubens Tapestry*, 194 for attributions.

25 NLM, Arch. 1215, ff. 974r, 975r, 989r, 990r.

26 *Ibid.*, ff. 1017r-1020v.

and delivery to Malta the Grand Master sent the Conventual Chaplain Fra Jean Baptiste Brix all the way to Brussels to have them packed and to accompany the precious set of tapestries to Malta. ²⁷The anxiously awaited gift and their subsequent display in the church would have been the cause of celebration and pomp. As the tapestries lined the entire perimeter of the church extolling the triumph of the Eucharist and the Life of Christ they complemented the grand paintings on the vault by Mattia Preti that told the life of St John the Baptist who was the precursor of Christ - this was the climax and final expression of the knights' spirituality and exuberance that completed the Baroque Counter Reformation decorative scheme of the Conventual Church.

Note: The Tapestries have been undergoing restoration since 2006, on the initiative of The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation. The restoration is being carried out at the De Witt Restoration Laboratories in Mechelen, Belgium under the direction of Mr Yvan Maes de Witt.

27 Scicluna, *The Church of St John*, 189.