

# 'Tenne peces of newe Arras': The Royal Tapestry Collection from Henry VIII to Charles I

Background notes

Dr Gillian White — 09 June 2021



'Gloria', border detail from *Abraham Purchases the Field of Ephron*, part of *The Story of Abraham*, c.1541-3 (Brussels)

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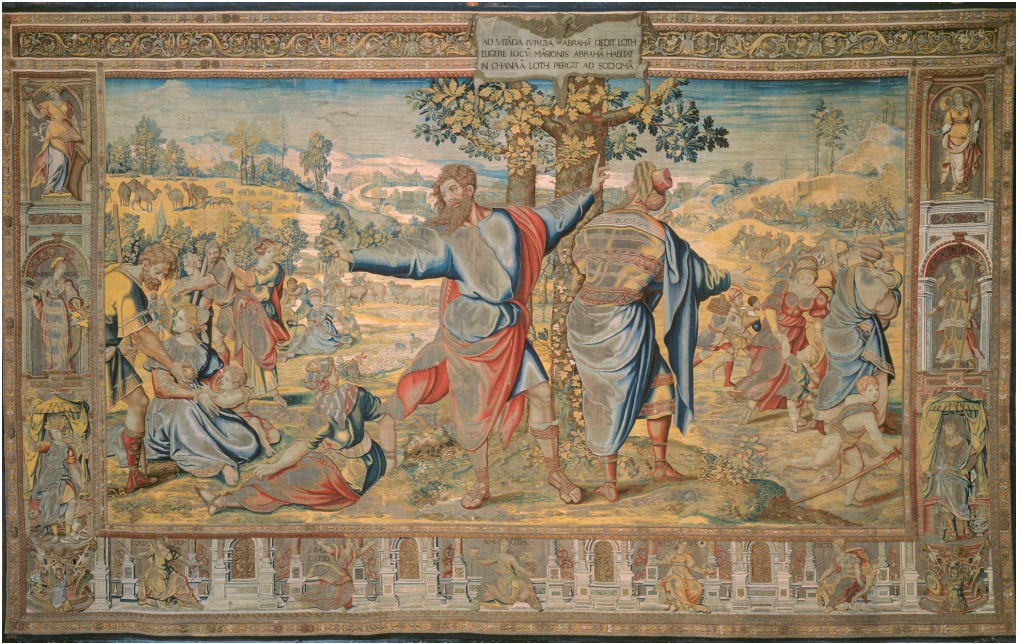
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## **‘Tenne peces of newe Arras’: The Royal Tapestry Collection from Henry VIII to Charles I**

The tapestry collection of King Henry VIII was the largest in the world. It outnumbered the collections of the King of France, the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope, its size and quality bringing honour and renown to the English king. On the walls of Henry’s palaces hung colourful, shimmering, vibrant textiles that bathed his court in magnificence. Nature, religion, history, myth, allegory and politics all contributed to the role tapestries played in the theatre of majesty and to the propaganda of Henry as the greatest prince in Christendom.

Very few of these tapestries have survived but our knowledge of them is greatly enhanced by the inventory of the king’s possessions made in 1547. Henry owned more than 2,450 tapestry wall hangings and over 300 other objects made of tapestry. The quantity is impressive but the quality was even more remarkable. Some, of course, were straightforward creations woven in wool, their designs often simple verdure. The majority would have been woven with wool and silk, giving delicacy and sheen to their narrative or figurative imagery. But around 330 were of the highest quality, properly known as ‘arras’, a term reserved for the most luxurious and expensive tapestries, the ones that were woven not just with wool and silk but with precious metal threads, with gold and silver and silver-gilt. Hung with arras, the walls of Henry’s rapidly expanding palaces would be filled with stories, alive with rich colours, the sheen of silk and the lustre of precious metal. The cost was phenomenal, the effect dazzling and the message clear: here rules a magnificent prince.

This magnificent prince had not purchased all the tapestries himself. Several pieces were inherited, not just from his father but from earlier generations of royalty stretching back to the fourteenth century. Surprisingly, the frequently parsimonious Henry VII also spent generously on extravagant tapestries as part of his policy to establish the Tudors on the world stage. *The Glorification of Christ*, a large arras tapestry now housed in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, was once the backcloth of a throne canopy purchased by him. In its original condition, it must have shone with a divine and golden radiance over the throne of the Tudors.

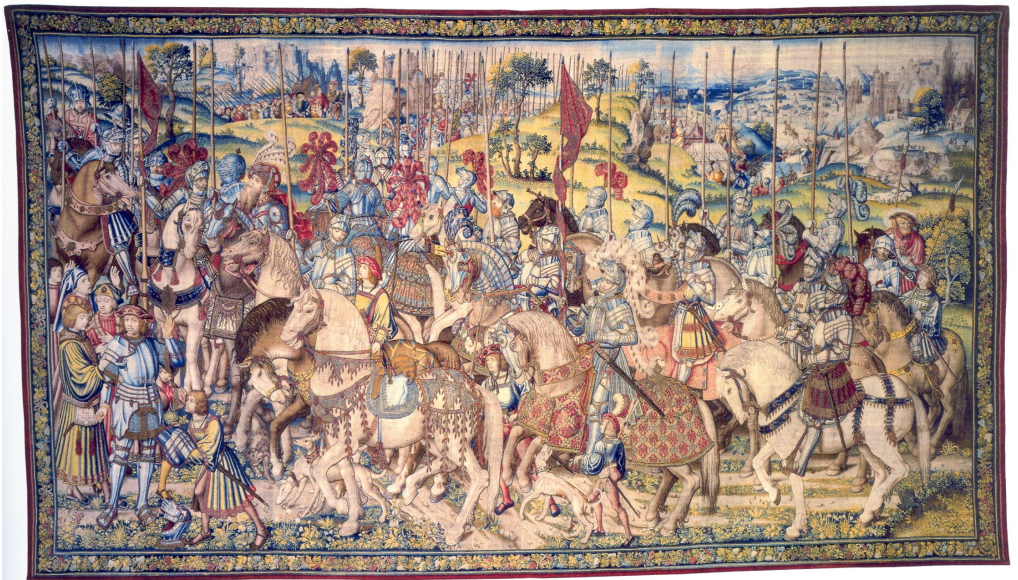


*The Separation of Abraham and Lot, part of The Story of Abraham, c.1541-3  
(Brussels)*

Inheritance was not the only path to possessing tapestries. Into the royal collection, too, tumbled the goods of courtiers attainted for treason. Even the monasteries were checked for likely tapestries as the king's commissioners drove on the work of dissolution. But it was the tapestry collection of Cardinal Wolsey that made the greatest contribution. Wolsey had purchased extensively and lavishly, not least for York Place (Whitehall) and Hampton Court. In 1517 alone, he probably commissioned ten large chambers of tapestry for these two properties: a colossal extravagance for the up-and-coming churchman. Two years later, the Venetian ambassador noted that Wolsey 'had a very fine palace, where one traverses eight rooms before reaching his audience chamber and they are all hung with tapestry, which is changed once a week'. In 1530, these riches dropped into the lap of the king, adding more than 600 tapestries to his collection, many still bearing the arms of his fallen mentor.



Amongst these happy windfalls of inheritance and attainder, there was also a constant stream of new purchases. In 1517 there was a payment of £1481 16s 3d for two sets of arras depicting the stories of King David and St. John the Baptist, and many others followed, with substantial payments in 1519 and 1520 for tapestries that may well have contributed to the lavish displays at the Field of Cloth of Gold. On went the purchases through the following decades. In October 1528, an enormous set of arras tapestries again depicting the story of King David was delivered, this time costing in excess of £1500. It is almost certainly now to be found at the Musée de la Renaissance, Écouen. In the same year, another arras set, *The Passion*, was acquired. About two years later, *The Story of Job* was bought and *The Story of Aeneas*, still at Hampton Court, followed shortly after. *The Story of Jacob* was also purchased in the early 1530s, and so on, through *The Twelve Months of the Year* and *The Seven Deadly Sins* of the mid 1530s.



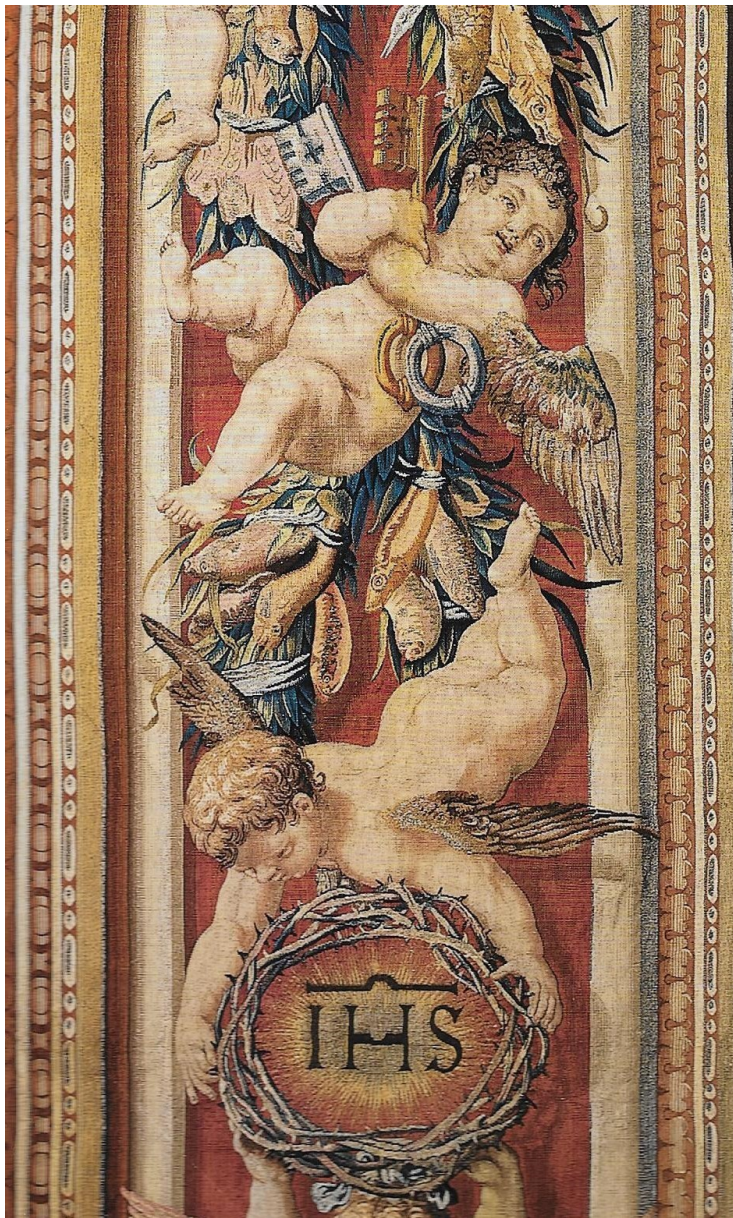
*The Assembly of the Troops*, part of *The Story of David*, c.1526-8 (Brussels)

But the greatest acquisitions date from the last decade of Henry's reign. In 1538-9 came a very large set of arras tapestries depicting *The Story of St. Paul*, and in 1542 two more sets, *The Acts of the Apostles* and *The Triumphs of the Gods*. These were both based on designs by Raphael and his school originally created for the Vatican and together they cost the sum of £2525 15s 6d. But even bigger and better was to follow. In 1543-4, the officials at Hampton Court took receipt of two superb sets of tapestry from new designs by the Antwerp artist Pieter Coecke. *The Story of Caesar* has gone but *The Story of Abraham*, the 'Tenne peces of newe Arras', hangs at Hampton Court, resplendent still after nearly five centuries. The list goes on and the constant stream of new delights must have amazed and awed Henry's courtiers.

The luxury and opulence of these purchases is clear but did their subject matter have a symbolic message as well? It seems likely that many were carefully chosen to project ideas about Henry's kingship. The story of Abraham particularly mirrors Henry's belief in himself as God's chosen leader, uniting his people, holding power over the priests, tested, and rewarded with a son only when he has put away a false wife and child. The implications would not have been lost on contemporaries as they stood before the monumental, golden tapestries in the presence of the king. It is even possible that the *Abraham* tapestries were commissioned for use at future coronations, ensuring that the message of divine approbation for the Tudor dynasty would be proclaimed on from generation to generation.

In truth, Henry VIII's children do not add to this story, although they lived surrounded by their father's magnificent tapestry collection. The first two Stuart monarchs were more active but they occupy a different role, as patrons and supporters of a new English tapestry manufacturing industry, not just as collectors.

In 1619, James I graciously undertook to fund the new Mortlake Tapestry Works then being proposed by Sir Francis Crane. But it was Prince Charles, the emerging art collector and connoisseur, who rushed to make the first purchases from the Mortlake looms, soon advancing money for a set of *Vulcan and Venus*, and a set of *The Months* that would then be given to the Duke of Buckingham as a gift. Three more sets of tapestry had been commissioned by the spring of 1625 and Charles would continue to support the works once he became king. By 1625, Francis Cleyn, a German-born artist and tapestry designer, who had wide experience of European taste, had come to work at Mortlake. His early designs there included *Hero and Leander*, a set of which was eagerly acquired by Charles.



Border detail from *The Miraculous Draft of Fishes*, part of *The Acts of the Apostles*, c.1636-7 (Mortlake)



In 1623, Charles purchased Raphael's original cartoons for *The Acts of the Apostles* tapestries to serve as patterns for new weavings to be created at Mortlake. The first set, woven in wool, silk and gilt-metal thread, and bearing the royal arms of King Charles, is considered to be Mortlake's finest work. Obviously, the designs were not new and Charles would have been familiar with Henry VIII's set of *The Acts*, but the original tapestries in the Sistine Chapel, which had created so much excitement amongst the earlier royalty of Europe, were still widely celebrated and for Charles, the chance to own Raphael's cartoons and to bring them to life again must have been intoxicating. Sadly for the king, as civil war enveloped the crown in the 1640s, control of the royal tapestry factory slipped through his fingers.



Detail from *Perseus on Pegasus Rescuing Andromeda*, part of *Horses*, c.1636-7  
(Mortlake)

So what became of all these tapestries? A few have survived; many more have been lost, victims of natural decay, of war and of fashion. But the greatest act of vandalism, the act that destroyed the essence of the collection, was the disposal of the late king's goods following the execution of Charles I in 1649. A few pieces were retained by the new regime for the better furnishing of official buildings but most were sold to the highest bidders. And so the glorious tapestries that had represented the magnificence of monarchy for so long were dispersed to the four winds.

### Suggestions for further reading

Thomas P. Campbell, *Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty: Tapestries at the Tudor Court* (2007) (Highly recommended)

Thomas P. Campbell, 'The Art and Splendour of Henry VIII's Tapestry Collection' in Maria Hayward and Philip Ward (eds), *The Inventory of King Henry VIII, Volume II, Textiles and Dress* (2012)

Wendy Hefford, 'The Mortlake Factory, 1619-49' in Thomas P. Campbell (ed.), *Tapestry in the Baroque: Threads of Splendor* (2007) (This whole volume can be read online or downloaded without cost from the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.)

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