

Royal Mortlake tapestry commissioned by Charles I,
lost for 100 years,
to be unveiled at London Art Week Summer 2019



S Franses of St James's will be staging an exhibition of "The Lost Tapestries of Charles I" during this summer's London Art Week. The exhibition's centrepiece is an extraordinary English tapestry made for King Charles I between 1620 and 1625 while he was still Prince of Wales (during the reign of his father James I). It was one of the first to be woven at the newly-formed Royal Mortlake Tapestry factory on the Thames, near Barnes, in south west London.

This long lost textile was originally part of a monumental set of nine tapestries based on the story of Vulcan and Venus from Homer's *Odyssey*. Although by the 18th century the set was in the possession of a private collector, the Royal Collection bought it back, and during the reign of Queen Victoria, the designer William Morris cut up most of it to create "The Tapestry Room" in St James's Palace (still in situ). Whilst today we would regard this as an act of cultural vandalism, at the time it was considered legitimate.

This left unaltered just the three largest of the original Vulcan and Venus set. The V&A acquired one of them in 1898 and a second in 1978 (now on view in the English Galleries Room 56), but the third and last tapestry remained in private ownership.

In the early 20th century it had been on loan to the Metropolitan Museum, New York, but was returned to its owner soon after the First World War, and disappeared from public view. Even at that time, it was considered to be a major work of English textile art, and illustrations of it were published in several tapestry books.

In the late 1980's S Franses carried out research to track down its whereabouts. The Upper East Side New York address in the Met's archives proved to be a dead end, as the house no longer existed. It transpires the tapestry had been sent to Germany at some stage, and eventually it turned up at a European auction house.

Simon Franses explains “remarkably it had been kept out of the light and was un-faded so was in a sad, rather than bad, condition, thankfully suffering very few losses. It has been carefully cleaned and conserved, revealing its wonderful gold threads: restored to its former glory it once again looks spectacular. The double CC and Prince of Wales feathers are visible, as is the weavers mark. Of the great Royal Mortlake Tapestry sets, most left this country as a result of the Commonwealth sales, and now are mainly in France and Sweden. The Vulcan and Venus is perhaps the most extraordinary – and is the last Royal Tapestry from Mortlake to become available on the market.”

S Franses will reveal the Vulcan tapestry during London Art Week, providing a rare and unique opportunity to see such an important and long lost textile in its home city. Some international museums have already expressed an interest in acquiring it, but it is also possible that it might go to a private buyer and not be seen in public ever again. The other two from the set, now at the V&A, are rarely on view at the same time.



In addition to this centrepiece, there will be two further major Mortlake tapestries. One is a probably unique example showing Dido and Aeneas, again commissioned by Charles I. He knew that the workshop needed life-sized designs to produce great tapestries (he also bought the Raphael cartoons now in the V&A). Charles I sent an agent to Flanders to buy the tapestry cartoons drawn by Perino del Vaga for the ruler of Genoa, whose original tapestries no longer exist, so these are probably the best in existence. Charles I decided to increase the size of this particular panel though, so he needed extra artwork. Mortlake’s artistic director Francis Cleyn created this larger design and a recently discovered sketchbook suggests that the additions are actual portraits.

The third major tapestry is from another monumental set designed by Cleyn for the King known as “The Great Horses”, but which was not actually produced until after the Civil War. It was commissioned by the Second Earl of Meath (of County Wicklow, Ireland) and woven either at Mortlake or Lambeth.

The exhibition therefore comprises key works from the Mortlake workshop from the first period around 1620 to around 1640 until after the Civil War around 1660.

All are taken from classical subjects, although the last tapestry is not based on 16th century prototypes. In addition, the exhibition will include some embroideries, ‘Turkey work’ and smaller textiles dating from the reign of Charles I.

For images or to arrange an interview, please contact the
London Art Week press office on press@londonartweek.co.uk.

Notes to editors:

The Importance of Mortlake Tapestry Works

It is little known that for about twenty years (1619-1640), Mortlake was producing the very best tapestries in all of Europe. Before then, Francois Spiering of Delft had been the pre-eminent supplier to the crowned heads of Europe. However his work was surpassed by Mortlake.

King James I and Charles I were not alone in establishing their own factories. Among others the Medici had done so in the 16th century. Cardinal Barberini, nephew of the Pope, opened one in Rome in the 17th century and Peter the Great one in St Petersburg. They wanted to be in control of design and production, and offered subsidies to experienced weavers to join these ventures.

Tapestries were far more costly than paintings and the most prestigious of art forms. Sets required years of labour and involved many different skill sets. First the full sized art works (cartoons) had to be produced, then they were woven on massive looms. Although principally artistic, the tapestries were often produced for the purposes of propaganda and prestige. These massive public images were suggestive of the taste and culture, lineage and military achievements of their owners. They were signalling particularly messages which the patrons wished to communicate. The effort, expenditure and time required to create these sets was enormous. These days, people often only see one tapestry not the entire set which misses the point of the monumentality and scale of these series.

Tapestries should also not be seen as decorative arts but a collaborative art. It involves the preliminary conception of full size painted artwork, which is followed by the execution - it is more like a piece of architecture requiring many specialisms to come together and certainly not the same as most decorative or applied arts, but a hybrid art form. It is often mis-understood, but effectively a fresco in woven form.

There are very few locations in the UK where you can see full sets of tapestries and therefore the whole narrative (Hampton Court, Osterley Park and Syon House are among them). Today, most collectors and museums can only ever aspire to acquire a single great piece to represent the highest achievement of this art form.

S Franes – 80 Jermyn Street, St. James's, London SW1Y 6JD
www.franses.com

