Thomas B. Campbell

Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty: Tapestries at the Tudor Court

New Haven and London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2007. Pp. xviii, 419

Tapestry in the Baroque. Threads of Splendor.

Edited by Thomas P. Campbell. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007. Pp. x, 563.

“Ah! what a life were this! how sweet! how lovely!/ Gives not the hawthorn bush a sweeter shade/ To shepherds, looking on their silly sheep/ Than doth a rich embroidered canopy/ To kings, that fear their subjects’ treachery?” (William Shakespeare, *Henry the Sixth Part III*, Act II, Scene v). The popularity of tapestries as domestic decor in English courtly and aristocratic circles of the Renaissance is attested to by their frequent appearance in the verse and drama of Shakespeare; sometimes happily, as when Gremio enumerates his tapestries as evidence of his wealth in Act 1 of the *Taming of the Shrew* and sometimes dramatically, as above or, more famously, when Polonius is stabbed while “behind the arras” in *Hamlet*. Despite their persistence in literature, however, much of the actual history of tapestries has been somewhat ignored by art and cultural historians, and until now very little scholarship has been available in English. Two new publications restore tapestry to its rightful role within art historical and material culture (pun intended) from the Renaissance to the Baroque. In both *Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty*, and in the catalogue for the recent exhibition *Tapestry in the Baroque*, held in 2007–2008 at the Metropolitan Museum and then the Palacio Real in Madrid, Thomas B. Campbell provides not only a comprehensive survey of the art of tapestry from the medieval to the Baroque, but re-establishes the centrality of the art of tapestry among the fine arts of Europe.

In *Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty*, Campbell meticulously analyzes documentary and archival evidence from the Tudor court to reconstruct the tapestry collections of the English kings. Basing himself on this evidence, in chapters dedicated to tapestry collecting from the medieval period to acquisitions under Henry VII and Henry VIII, as well as by Cardinal Woolsey, he examines the “practical, aesthetic and political” reasons for commissioning, displaying, and collecting tapestries at the English court (ix). His central document is a comprehensive two-volume inventory made of the collection at the death of Henry VIII in 1547, after which 95% of the tapestries described were dispersed or lost entirely. Given these dispersals and losses, he admits that the specific analysis of subjects, iconography, and style must

be left to a certain amount of “conjecture.” This conjecture is based on a careful comparison between the subjects and dimensions of the Tudor tapestries listed in the inventory to surviving cognate sets made, often by the same workshops, for other collectors in the same period. Such comparisons are possible because families of weavers designed families of tapestries and there is a kind of genealogy of subjects that Campbell traces in order to recreate what has been lost; it is an astonishing feat of scholarship.

For example, an entire chapter is devoted to two large sets of ten tapestries each, one depicting the *Story of Caesar* and the other the *Story of Abraham* made in the last decade of the reign of Henry VIII. That these were extremely valuable is attested to by their size (as listed in the inventory) and by the value they were assigned at the Commonwealth sale of 1649, at which time the *Abraham* set was given the highest valuation of any of the tapestries listed (356). So, although these specific tapestries have disappeared, Campbell uses a contemporary set on the same subjects in the National Museum at Écouen and in the Vatican to infer the probable subjects of the ten pieces listed. He then analyzes the political and propagandistic significance of the subject matter for Henry, imperial and dynastic, and speculates about where and how these images might have been used by the king.

Campbell’s analysis of the documents is masterful and meticulous, as is his approach to context and content in the history of tapestry art. He enumerates the complex taxonomies that apply to tapestry commissioning as well as collecting, since these objects could range from the small and practical, like altar frontals and window pieces, to large-scale wall-hangings with complex religious, mythological, and allegorical content. His emphasis here is on the large-scale, historiated sets. Tapestries also represented new complexities in terms of commissions and commerce. They could be made in a variety of materials from high to low value, they could be specifically commissioned or bought as readymade sets for home or office; direct from the manufacturer or through the offices of various international agents and brokers. For me, it is the commerce and capitalism of tapestry that is as fascinating as the art itself. As Campbell writes, by the latter half of the sixteenth century “much of the Netherlandish tapestry industry was controlled by financiers who underwrote the advance costs of materials and wages” (262). One wants to know more, for example, about Giovanni Battista Gualteroti (John Baptist Gualterote), a Florentine spice merchant in Antwerp who sold tapestries to Henry VIII.

The book is equally valuable for its emphasis on tapestries as functional art, and connections are made between architectural projects and tapestry commissions. In the 1530s and 1540s, important series were ordered for, or assigned to, Nonsuch,

Hampton Court and for the project to renovate and modernize Whitehall Palace, all of them with iconographic agendas (like the *Story of Abraham*, the *Story of Caesar*, the *Labours of Hercules*, the *Acts of the Apostles*) pertinent to Henry's political project of "apostolic succession" (274). This rich history of artistic, architectural, and material culture is beautifully illustrated with architectural drawings, painted and drawn architectural views, and interior photos that combine to amplify the living contexts for which these objects were made and in which they were seen and interpreted at court.

Tapestry in the Baroque, Threads of Splendor is the enormous and stunningly illustrated catalogue for the exhibition of Baroque tapestries, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from October 2007 to January 2008 and then at the Palacio Real in Madrid in March to June of 2008. The exhibition of Baroque tapestries at the Met was a kind of sequel to the 2003 exhibition *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence*, and demonstrates a clear commitment on the part of the museum to revive and reinvigorate the study of tapestry as a major form of luxury art in the early modern period.

The history of tapestry art is really a history of the royal and aristocratic houses of Europe, and the age of absolutism is the age of greatest magnificence in this most traditional of royal art forms. The catalogue, edited by Campbell, is as rewarding for its scholarly content as for its visual impact, providing insight into the major European centres of production; the Netherlands, Paris, Mortlake, the Spanish Netherlands, Florence, Rome, the Gobelins workshop and the Royal Tapestry works at Beauvais. Within the history of art, and its continuing emphasis, particularly in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, on monuments and masterpieces, tapestry art has suffered a bit from its association with copies and collectives. Like printmaking, it was an essential form of cultural production that involved famous artists, from Raphael to Rubens, but that also thrived on the talents of expert craftsmen and tradesmen. Also like printmaking, tapestry art involved complex processes of translation from original designs to completely different media, in this case cartoons to textiles. Raphael's designs, most famously the cartoons for the *Acts of the Apostles* (now in the v&A and restored some years ago, see Sharon Fermor, *The Raphael Tapestry Cartoons: narrative, decoration, design*, London, 1996) proved infinitely "translatable" by weavers, whereas Rubens's designs for the *Decius Mus* series were made in oil on panel and, even though they were copied in traditional cartoon form by members of his workshop, involved such a range of dramatic colours that the weavers were forced to experiment with dyes that have since faded over time (104).

These processes of translation from one media to another are extremely important in the history of cultural production and should inspire further study.

All of the contributors here are experts in the complexities of tapestry history, a history which embraces not only these relations between artists, designers, weavers, and workshops, as well as carters and dyers, but insights into multiples and copies of varying design, material and quality, not to mention the whole history of dispersals and displacements and variables of taste which impacted attitudes towards the value and display of such multiples and movables. These publications demonstrate that the field of tapestry research is rich with possibilities for historians of visual and material culture and this first truly comprehensive survey of Baroque tapestry art in English should inspire a whole generation of scholars to look “behind the arras.”

SALLY HICKSON, *University of Guelph*

Miriam Bodian

Dying in the Law of Moses: Crypto-Jewish Martyrdom in the Iberian World

Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007. Pp. xvii, 278

In this study Bodian examines through careful analysis of the Inquisitorial trial records and surrounding contemporary literature well-known early modern “dogmatista” martyrs in the Sephardic Jewish tradition. As Bodian points out in the first chapter, most scholarship on Jewish martyrs has focused on the classical tradition or on Franco-German Jewish martyrdom literature of the twelfth century. While the anti-Jewish pogroms and politico-social persecutions that began in Spain in 1391 did not produce the rich martyrdom literature found in the earlier Ashkenazi tradition (perhaps as Bodian suggests because in Spain Christian clerics sought Jewish conversion without giving many opportunities for martyrdom), many Jews in Spain from the fourteenth century on did, in Bodian’s words, “choose martyrdom ... to avoid conversion” (5). These early Sephardic acts of martyrdom were followed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by a growing corpus of anti-Christian polemics (“Jewish counter-propaganda” to similar Christian anti-Jewish polemics). In the second chapter Bodian narrows down the definition of the “dogmatista crypto-Jewish martyr” she uses to distinguish the four cases she studies in subsequent chapters. These martyrs laid out their athletic, masculine defiance of Church doctrine (the cases she presents all profile men who self-circumcise as an act of resistance to the Church and identity assertion) and open confession of belief in the Law of Moses in drawn out Inquisitorial trials. Such public performances of martyrdom