

EXHIBITION

California Palace of the Legion of Honor
February 10–November 2001

The Triumph of Prudence and the Triumph of Fortitude

SARAH GATES AND MELISSA LEVENTON
Head Conservator of Textiles and Curator-in-Charge of Textiles

GALLERY 2



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1. Fortitude (detail) from the *Triumph of Fortitude*.

2. Conservation in progress. The tapestry frame has three beams. The middle one can be raised or lowered to adjust the tension and the angle of the tapestry to suit the conservator.

3. All conservation stitches taken in the tapestry pass through the linen support, or “scrim,” which acts like a second skin.

4. The head of Cyrus the Great, with new warp threads extending from his left eye, prior to couching.

5. Abigail after conservation. Her gown was woven of light-colored silk, and the damage to it was so severe that it required new warp and weft threads throughout.

The *Triumph of the Seven Virtues* series is one of the masterpieces of sixteenth-century tapestry. Woven in Brussels in the 1520s and 1530s, the series was composed originally of seven tapestries, each depicting historical, mythical, and biblical characters and scenes exemplifying one of the cardinal or theological virtues—Faith, Hope, Charity, Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance. Examples of all but the *Triumph of Temperance* exist in collections in Europe and the United States, and the Fine Arts Museums are blessed with three of them—*Prudence*, *Fortitude*, and *Justice*, donated to the collection in the 1950s and 1960s by the Provident Securities Co. and the Hearst Foundation.

The *Triumphs* tapestries are among the Fine Arts Museums’ most important Renaissance tapestries, but until recently, they were also among those in poorest condition, deemed too fragile to hang for display. Thanks to two federal grants, the Museums were able to mount a major conservation effort on the *Triumph of Prudence* and the *Triumph of Fortitude*. Both projects were organized by head FAM textile conservator Sarah Gates and spearheaded by two specialist conservators from the Tapestry Conservation Studio at Hampton Court Palace in England with skilled assistance from conservation intern Yadin Larochette. On February 10, these two monumental tapestries went on exhibition at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor for the first time in more than twenty-five years.

Time, gravitational stress and stress from display itself, and the inevitable exposure to light and soil can damage textiles, so it is not surprising that these 500-year-old tapestries are fragile, and that they have been repaired many times over the centuries. However, the pre-conservation evaluation of the *Triumph of Prudence* cited a daunting litany of woes: numerous broken warps; extensive loss of silk weft and many weak and friable areas of woolen weft; loss of color; stress, disfiguration, and loss of fine imagery caused by excessive darning and other bad repairs; and extensive damage to the floral borders and guards (the



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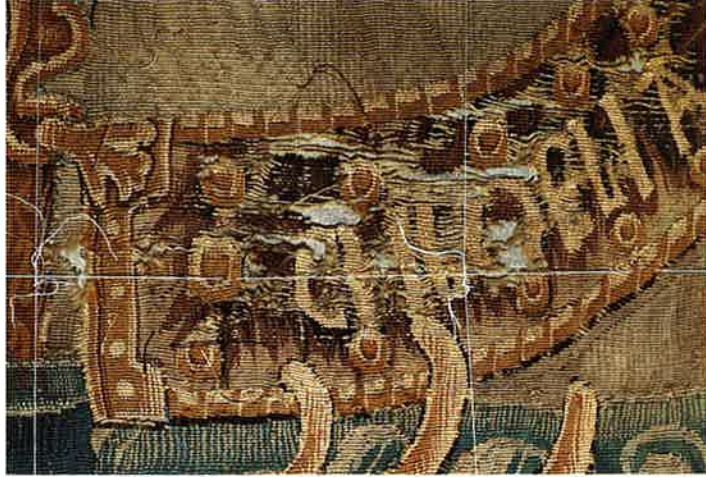


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plain, narrow, outermost edge of weaving). Correcting them all would take far more time and money than was at our disposal, so we decided to fully conserve only the most degraded areas and stitch a grid support through the remaining weak areas to make the tapestry safe for display and as visually pleasing as possible (1).

Treatment began with a light vacuuming of the tapestry, done through nylon net to prevent suction damage to weak and friable areas. *Prudence* had been washed in 1980, so additional wet cleaning was not necessary. Following vacuuming and overall “pre-treatment” photography, the tapestry was rolled onto a custom-made, loomlike frame. The frame gave the tapestry necessary support during treatment and made it possible for the conservators to reach any part of it easily (2). Once it was on the frame, old patches and bad repairs were removed; previous repairs that were structurally sound and not visually disturbing were left in place. In order to stabilize the tapestry, a full support interlining of medium-weight, plain-weave linen was then basted on. All the stitches the conservators put into the tapestry went through this support or “scrim,” which acts like a second skin (3). Once the support was in place, the large, structurally damaging holes in the wool areas were rewarped with new yarns custom-dyed to match the old ones (4). The new warps were then couched down with a dyed weft of wool and fine polyester threads in wool weft areas, or polyester only in silk weft areas (5). (Couching, or “tabby-darning,” is a frequently used conservation technique in which the bare warps are stitched over with new yarns in an even, alternating pattern that simulates a woven surface. It is not as dense or damaging to the original as reweaving). Fortunately, smaller holes did not require rewarping; instead, they were supported with a simple grid of stabilizing couching.

The guards were the next area to receive attention; for the top edge, a replacement guard was woven and dyed to order in England to replace the existing one, which was not original to the tapestry and had faded to



an inappropriate color. The lower guard was original and bore the factory and weavers' marks, but its edge was badly worn and the marks had been partially turned under. Though it was far more labor-intensive, it was decided to make the marks fully visible again. The lower guard was unfolded and its degraded edge was supported onto a dyed, light-weight wool fabric, called nun's veiling, for protection and visibility.

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The final step was to remove the tapestry from the frame and line it completely with tightly woven cotton cambric, which acts as a dust cover, and to protect the conservation work. The entire process took more than three years and many hands to complete.



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Because the materials and dyestuffs used in repairs were often different than the originals, such repairs may no longer match the original weaving or may distort the tapestry visually or physically. As it did with the *Triumph of Prudence*, the conservation for the *Triumph of Fortitude* included the removal of old repairs, and this spurred some of the most challenging and interesting conservation work.

It is common for medieval and Renaissance tapestries to identify by name the mythical, historical, or biblical figures they depict. We were surprised to discover that the spelling of the name attached to one of the figures had been altered during a past restoration. Before conservation, this figure, mounted on horseback, was labeled "Cloelia" (in antiquity, a Roman virgin given as one of twenty good-faith hostages to the Etruscan king Porsenna, from whom she escaped by swimming across the river Tiber). When disfiguring restorations were removed and the pattern of the remaining original threads examined, it was found that the tapestry's original weaver had spelled the lady's name "Chloelia"—the "h" was somehow dropped in later repairs (6). To treat this area and recover the original spelling of Chloelia's name, the conservators used couching yarns dyed the color of the original weft. This couching suggested the original color of the area. Care was taken so that the new stitches did not become too obvious or damage the more fragile, older threads (7).

The title figure of Fortitude rides into the upper center of the tapestry in a chariot drawn by lions, surrounded by symbols of her identity. Perhaps the most rewarding repair done on this tapestry was to the wing of the symbolic eagle that rides at the front of Fortitude's chariot. An earlier repair to the eagle's wing, which covered a 6-x-8-inch area, had



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badly distorted both the tapestry's surface and the pattern of the eagle's breast and back feathers (8). As often happens when old repairs are removed, the area requiring conservation turned out to be much larger than originally anticipated, and it became clear that the eagle's wing would need to be reconstructed (9).

Fortunately, three other complete weavings of the *Triumph of Fortitude* still exist. The conservators consulted the *Fortitude* owned by the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, England, in their quest to replicate the original pattern of the eagle's feathers as closely as possible. The Walker's *Fortitude* is from an earlier edition of the series and their eagle was not an exact match, but it was close enough to provide a very reasonable idea of what had originally existed. A small photograph of the Walker's eagle was obtained, which the conservators scaled up to the actual size of the Fine Arts Museums' eagle and used to create a mylar template for the missing feathers (10). The template was used to guide couching stitches over both old and new warps; the conservators checked it against the tapestry frequently as they worked and adjusted their stitches accordingly. The finished eagle blends in perfectly with the tapestry, demonstrating that this painstaking operation was well worth the time and effort required (11).



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The conservation of the *Triumphs* tapestries was made possible by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute for Museum Services (now the Institute for Museum and Library Services) and funds from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The exhibition is made possible by generous gifts from George and Marie Hecksher and Anna Gray Bennett.



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6. The tag for the figure of Chloelia following removal of the old repair that masked the letter "h."

7. Chloelia following conservation, which recovered the original spelling of her name.

8. The eagle in poor condition prior to conservation.

9. Removal of old repairs leaves a large hole in the eagle's wing.

10. Conservation of the wing in process. At upper right is the guiding template made from the eagle depicted in the *Triumph of Fortitude* in Liverpool.

11. The finished eagle.