

Long-Term Support Enables a Conservation Triumph



Triumph of Justice (before restoration), from the *Triumph of the Seven Virtues* series. ca. 1535. 14 ft. 5 in. x 18 ft. 1 in. Wool, silk, tapestry weave. FAMSf, gift of the William Randolph Hearst Foundation



Triumph of Justice. The figure of Justice in the tapestry's upper right

The Fine Arts Museums are fortunate to have one of the four most highly rated collections of monumental European tapestries in the United States and the best such collection west of the Mississippi. Included are three Flemish tapestries from the series *The Triumph of the Seven Virtues*. These three are *The Triumph of Fortitude*, *The Triumph of Justice*, and *The Triumph of Prudence*.

Now after twelve years, and through the generous support of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, all three of these beautiful and important 500-year-old tapestries have been conserved. *Fortitude* and *Prudence* were both completed and put on display in 2001, and *The Triumph of Justice* was more recently completed.

Additional conservation funding was provided by the Textile Arts Council, the San Francisco Auxiliary of the Fine Arts Museums and Mr. and Mrs. David Bogolub. Because of the generosity of these institutions and individuals, these three tapestries can now be safely displayed and enjoyed.

Woven in Belgium during the early 16th century, these tapestries each depict one of the seven Christian Virtues, personified and surrounded by allegorical and historical figures that exemplify them. In addition to the three tapestries in the Museums' collection, versions depicting Faith, Hope, and Charity are held in other collections worldwide. Sadly, the tapestry for Temperance has been lost to time. It is hoped that by working with other institutions, an exhibition of all six of the surviving tapestries can be arranged, possibly demonstrating how they may originally have been displayed.

The *Triumph* tapestries are chock full of figures; the small amount of visible landscape is high up at the top edge of the main field. There are biblical and classical human figures as well as symbolic animals, both real and allegorical, such as lions, unicorns, and multi-headed dragons. Each tapestry was interpreted in detail by curator emeritus Anna G. Bennett in the 1976 Fine Arts Museums publication *The Five Centuries of Tapestry*, which has become a standard reference in the field.

Tapestries are characterized by both their great size and fragility. Woven from side to side, they are actually constructed so that they must be hung from their weakest side, causing stress and strain damage from display itself. Now that the tapestries are more physically stable, they can be hung safely.

The conservation treatments on each of these tapestries took between two and one half and five years to complete. Each has been supported with a thin linen lining which acts as a "second skin" to hold the tapestry together. They have improved aesthetically by the replacement of old, disfiguring repairs. Only lightfast (resistant to fading) yarns and fabrics were used; they often required custom dyeing to the exact hue needed.

Because conservators work so closely with the woven structure, it was they who discovered that

Fortitude's Cloelia is actually spelled "Chloelia" — the "h" was dropped in old repairs. Similarly, while working on *Justice*, a previously unnamed figure was able to be identified as "YOSEF" when the faint name band came to light under old repairs.

Even more dramatic was the unplanned repair made to the eagle's wing in the center of *Fortitude*. When a large old repair was removed, it left a hole that was larger than expected, and it became clear that the wing would need reconstruction. In order to replace the feather pattern accurately, images were obtained from another version of *Fortitude*, owned by the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, England. This image was then enlarged to match the scale of the tapestry's eagle, and various brown-toned repair yarns were placed to match the feather pattern.

The Museums would like to acknowledge and thank everyone who helped work on these projects, especially the dedicated staff and volunteers of the conservation lab, including head textiles conservator Sarah Gates, Beth Szuhay, Joanne Hackett, Barbara Arthur, Barbara Nitzberg, Bonnie Lawson, Janet Glesner, Jean Scardine, Kathy Murphy, Trish Daly, and consultants Robert Allen and Hannah Lumb Riley; Yadin Larochette, who provided both research and conservation treatment expertise; Anna G. Bennett, curator emeritus and founder of the Department of Textiles and the textiles conservation lab; and former director of the Fine Arts Museums, Harry S. Parker III, who supported this project from the beginning.



Triumph of Justice. In center of tapestry, animal design before treatment



Triumph of Justice. The same section after treatment