



## ON THE TRAIL OF LEONARDO IN FRANCE. SILK, SILVER AND GOLD THREADS, THE ENIGMA OF *THE LAST SUPPER* TAPESTRY

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In Marseilles, on Tuesday 28 October 1533, Pope Clement VII of the noble house of Medici, blessed the nuptial union of two fourteen-year-olds, Catherine, niece of the pope and Henry of Valois, second son of the *Rex Cristianissimus* François I.

The marriage was arranged for strong political reasons and preceded by lengthy negotiations, strictly linked to the rivalry between the houses of Habsburg and Valois for the domination of Italy.

For Clement VII this union was a great chance to reinforce the alliance between the Medici and the French crown by curbing Charles V's power in Italy. In fact, only a few years earlier in 1527, his imperial troops had put the Eternal City to fire and sword. For François I this marital tie with the pope and the Medici family was a golden opportunity to consolidate his hegemony over Italy and counteract the power of the Habsburgs.

The preparations and ceremony that were to seal this accord were impressive and magnificent. On Saturday 11 October the pope, with his abundant retinue and a host of bishops, prelates and cardinals, landed in Marseilles on the royal galley of France captained by the Duke of Albany, which was decorated with gilded sculptures on a black ground and richly adorned with precious fabrics.<sup>1</sup> The galley standards were embroidered with sumptuous, silk fleurs-de-lys and it was escorted by a large fleet. Four ships carried litters, horses, church furnishings and trappings to be used for the ceremonies and consistories on French soil. Welcomed by a festive gun salute Pope Clement VII disembarked and went to the Church of Saint Augustin to give thanks to God, and then to the so-called "Garden" where he spent the night, before entering the city the next day. The bourgeois Honorat de Valbelle, a keen observer and witness of the events, gives an enraptured description of the ceremonies, writing that the sound of the trumpets, clarinets and oboes was so celestial as to make you think you were in an "earthly paradise".<sup>2</sup>

On 12 October the future bride entered Marseilles following the papal procession. The choreography of the event could not have been more spectacular. Preceded by a white horse bearing the Most Holy Sacrament, the pope advanced on the gestatorial chair followed by cardinals in red robes, and white mules. Then came the bride accompanied by ladies and knights of the court and a large and variegated courtly entourage.

The following day, the king entered accompanied by two sons and a similarly lavish spectacle, to visit the pope at the palace in Place Neuve. The next day, it was the turn of the queen and Dauphin of France who were received with equal ceremony.

During the subsequent days, the pope and the king, who were staying in different mansions connected by a wooden bridge, often met to finalize the marriage agreement.

On the day of the wedding, Catherine, sumptuously dressed in a magnificent gown of silk brocade embroidered in silver and gold, studded with pearls and diamonds, with a violet velvet mantle trimmed with ermine, was accompanied by the king. She wore the precious gold crown of a duchess and the king held her arm, guiding her with great pomp and circumstance. Then came the queen, also dressed in brocade, decorated with pearls, diamonds and all manner of precious stones.<sup>3</sup>

This important festive occasion was celebrated by an exchange of rare and valuable gifts. *Rex Cristianissimus* François I received as a tribute from the pope a rock crystal and gilded silver casket, which the famous goldsmith Valerio Belli had decorated with 24 scenes of the life of Christ<sup>4</sup> and “corno lungo due braccia di Liocorno legato in una base d’oro con bellissimi lavori per cacciar il veleno dalle vivande”<sup>5</sup> – in actual fact, this was the tooth of a narwhal, one of the most iconic and mysterious cetaceans from the Arctic – mounted on an elegant, finely worked base. For this highly prized object – which it was believed could detect poison in food – the pope had paid the exorbitant sum of 24,000 ducats to the goldsmith Tobia da Camerino, who had won the competition for the work against the great Benvenuto Cellini, by designing an object “a foggia di un candegliere, dove, a guisa della candela, si imboccava quell bel corno, e del piede di questo ditto candegliere faceva Quattro testoline di liocorno con semplicissima invenzione.”<sup>6</sup>

The French sovereign gave the pope a rare and very precious work, a tapestry in silk, silver and gold depicting *The Last Supper*, which Leonardo had painted in the refectory in the Dominican Monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan years earlier.

This ceremony of the exchange of gifts between the two rulers has been immortalized in the

fine 16th-century drawing by Antoine Caron in the *Histoire française*, accompanied by an explanatory couplet: “Dal santo padre al Re un liocorno fu donato. Ed ecco come il Re un arazzo a lui ha dato.”<sup>7</sup> In the centre François I is captured in the act of showing the pope the tapestry of *The Last Supper* held by two figures, while in the oval on the left a footman is presenting the king, in the presence of the pope, with the long “horn” mounted on a decorated base.<sup>8</sup>

Honorat de Valbelle, who attended the lavish ceremonies during that joyous event, recalls that a few days after the wedding, on 1 November, the Great Hall, namely the chapel of the pope where the mass had been said, remained open to display the relics that the pope had brought from Rome. He writes that he went there himself to kiss the relics and see the tapestry – probably the tapestry of *The Last Supper* – that the king had decided to exhibit.<sup>9</sup> His comments are among the most enthusiastic: “J’y suis allé pour baiser les reliques et voir la tapisserie que le Roi y avait fait placer et je vous assure que, pour chaque laize, il lui en a coûté douze pièces de six. Je crois que cette tapisserie est la plus riche et la mieux faite qu’on ait jamais vue. Elle était tissée d’or, d’argent et de fine soie aux couleurs délicates avec des personnages si bien tissés qu’ils paraissaient vivants ; tout le monde les regardait comme des merveilles, tant ils étaient beaux et somptueux, et l’on ne pouvait se rassasier de les voir.”<sup>10</sup>

Little is known of the history of the tapestry, which appeared almost from nowhere on the occasion of that noble marriage, an event linked to the earliest certain information we have about its presence in France. In 1533 the wall hanging is mentioned in an inventory at the Château de Blois where it is included in the fabrics chosen to be taken to Marseille for the nuptials.<sup>11</sup>

Prior to that date the finely worked tapestry seems to be shrouded in a veil of mystery. In fact, it is very strange that this work should never have been mentioned before, since it depicts one of the best loved and most iconic images in history, is supremely refined in technique, woven in gold, silver and silk, and measures as much as 5 × 9 metres. Moreover, it features the coat of arms of the king of France alongside the emblems of Louise of Savoy, the monarch’s powerful mother, and even more importantly the king presented it to the pope on the occasion of the marriage in Marseille and it was to seal the alliance between France and the papacy.

The work also appears in a payment order of 28 November 1533, which was sent to the treasurer so that he should pay Nicolas de Troyes, the king’s silversmith, the considerable sum of 1,897 “livres 2 sous 6 deniers tournois” for the purchase of silk, gold and silver cloth, white

and yellow silk, a piece of yellow fabric used to enrich the tapestry.<sup>12</sup> A bill from the following month is evidence of payment to de Troyes for work on the tapestry and to the embroiderer Robinet probably for the garments of the footmen and the king to be worn at the marriage ceremony.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from these few facts nothing further is known for certain about the history of this tapestry, considered until today by scholars, because of its dating to the early decades of the 16th century, to be the first example of an Italian painting – one of the most famous – Leonardo's *Last Supper* at Santa Maria delle Grazie, to be reproduced in its entirety.<sup>14</sup>

The few in-depth studies on the tapestry<sup>15</sup> have focused on the fact that it was commissioned by Louise of Savoy and her son François, which is evident from an iconographic reading of the work, which overtly references these two personages in the coats of arms, monograms and emblems that date it to before the death of Louis XII and François I's ascent to the throne. The place where it was executed is also uncertain, though it is generally thought to be Flanders, an important region renowned for its production of refined tapestries.

Unfortunately, this thorny issue cannot be solved with any certainty, due to lack of reliable evidence. Conjectures resulting from a close examination of the tapestry and the new elements that have emerged through the recent restoration work carried out in the Tapestries and Textiles Restoration Laboratory in the Vatican Museums, under the direction of the present writer, have added new and important data to be explored further.

The tapestry, as we have said above, reproduces the famous mural painting of *The Last Supper* that Leonardo executed on a wall of the refectory in the Dominican Monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie, commissioned by Ludovico il Moro, duke of Milan, between 1494 and 1498. The work faithfully reprises the main scene with Christ and the disciples around the table, though it completely changes the setting in which the event takes place.

The sober, spare backdrop against which the Milan *Last Supper* is set is replaced by lavish almost luxurious Renaissance architecture, seen in perspective thanks to the device of the *millefleurs* panels on either side, acting like theatre wings, which draw the eye towards the three large arches behind the figures, opening onto a landscape with hills and mountains on the horizon.

On the architrave, above the three arches, decorated with an elegant frieze of winged horses, *candelabra* motifs and shells framed by plant volutes, there is a balustrade and hanging from it the crowned coat of arms of the king of France with gold fleurs-de-lys on a blue ground,

surrounded by the collar of the Order of Saint Michael. Some buildings can be glimpsed behind the balustrade; on one side crenellated walls with elegant mullioned windows and a circular edifice, on the other some square brick buildings.

The whole work is surrounded by a refined border of grotesques against a blue ground, with the monogram of Louise of Savoy, her emblem of wings and François I's emblem of salamanders.

At the two corners of the lower border the monogram "LOSE" refers, in fact, to Louise and her house (Savoy), to her husband Charles of Angoulême of the Orléans branch, and to the title Dame of Épernay and Romorantin,<sup>16</sup> as well as the name Louise<sup>17</sup> and her motto: *Pennas dedisti, volabo et requiescam* (God has given me wings, I shall fly and I shall rest).<sup>18</sup> The wings are a decorative motif recurring throughout the border, while when placed on either side of François I's salamanders (cat. 22.b) they seem to evoke maternal protection of her son.

Six uncrowned salamanders in flames (two in each of the horizontal borders and one in the centre of each of the vertical borders) surround the main scene and are an explicit reference to François I, who adopted this emblem, formerly used by his grandfather, in 1504.<sup>19</sup>

At the corners of the upper border there are two monograms that are somewhat difficult to decipher (four Fs and a knot?), which may perhaps refer to François I's monogram that appears on the blade of François of Angoulême's sword<sup>20</sup> or they may be interpreted as two Fs combined with the letter C of Claude of France, daughter of Louis XII and wife of François I.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, there is definitely a C beside the F below the salamander in the plaque on the left border. A similar plaque with the letters F and L, the initials of François I and Louise is found on the border opposite.

The whole ornamental band is surrounded by knots, the emblems of the House of Savoy, but also of François I, who had adopted them as a sign of gratitude to Saint François of Paola, hermit and founder of the Order of Minims, to whom Louise had recourse in order to bear a child.<sup>22</sup>

Below the upper border, in the centre, is displayed the coat of arms of the king of France surrounded by the collar of the Order of Saint Michael, a chivalric order founded by King Louis XI at the Château d'Amboise, on 1 August 1469. Hence, the entire decorative scheme revolves around François I and his mother Louise, both personages with a vast humanist culture, patrons of works of art and lovers of tapestries, of which they commissioned a

considerable number over the years.

Among the most famous and precious of these, and worthy of mention on a par with the Vatican work, is the beautiful tapestry fragment in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.<sup>23</sup> It bears the coats of arms and emblems of Louise and François, then still Count of Angoulême, dating it to between 1508 and 1512. Here too mother and son are closely linked, as in the Vatican tapestry, and it reprises part of the decorative scheme. We should also mention the prized tapestry, reproduced in a refined 18th-century watercolour,<sup>24</sup> in which the royal coat of arms of François I is featured surrounded by the collar of the Order of Saint Michael, salamanders and crowned Fs.

Thus, from the outset, an iconographic reading of the work has enabled scholars<sup>25</sup> to connect the commissioning of the tapestry with the mother and son, and to suggest a date prior to François I's ascent to the throne (1515). This is based on the fact that the salamanders are not crowned,<sup>26</sup> but above all on the theory that the addition cited in the document of 1533 refers to the royal coat of arms. Thus it was thought that the work was executed before 1515 during the reign of Louis XII, an ardent admirer of Leonardo's work, so much so that, according to sources, he wanted to find a way of bringing to France the mural painting of *The Last Supper* he had seen during his visit to Milan in 1499.<sup>27</sup>

The hypothesis regarding the later addition of the coat of arms could only be verified by examining the back of the tapestry, which was made possible during recent restoration.<sup>28</sup> This proved, however, that the coat of arms was in actual fact part of the original design, since the weaving showed no signs of any additions.

Therefore, the tapestry was woven after 1515, the year François ascended the throne. Moreover, further confirmation of this is the double string of the collar of the Order of Saint Michael, surrounding the coat of arms.

In fact, shortly after ascending the throne, in one of the first meetings of the Order held in Blois in September 1516, he decided to modify the collar of the Order<sup>29</sup> by replacing the original *aignillettes* linking the shells with a double string of knots, thus evoking the Françoisian cord and the maternal House of Savoy,<sup>30</sup> just as it appears in the tapestry.

The ambiguous document of 1533, however, still remains an open question. It mentions the payment to Nicolas de Troyes silversmith to the king and to the embroiderer Robinet for an unspecified addition to the tapestry and for the garments of the King and footmen to be worn at the important wedding ceremony.

The 1536 inventory of the *Floreria Apostolica* refers to a tapestry in the Vatican “panno bellissimo con Istoria della Cena domini foderato di tella rossa circondato de uno fregio di velluto cremisi con ... di tella doro con lettere C.F”.<sup>31</sup>

I think that the above-mentioned addition may be the red velvet border embroidered in gold and silk and with letters, which may have been done by the very Robinet cited in the document, probably to be identified as Robinet de Luc (Robert de Luz), who was embroiderer and *valet de chambre* of Louise of Savoy, and from 13 December 1532 embroiderer and *valet de chambre* of King François I, as well as the author of a collection of poems.<sup>32</sup> Subsequent inventories also mention the border, unfortunately now lost though present in the inventories until 1825<sup>33</sup>, bearing the coat of arms of the pope and the king that were probably made with the cloth and fabrics cited in the document.

It is hardly surprising that, after deciding to give the pope such a highly prized work, François I should have enhanced its value even more by the presentation ceremony, which took place with great pomp.

The tapestry, therefore, may have been woven after September 1516, the date when the collar of the Order of Saint Michael around the royal coat of arms was modified and before 1524, at the latest, which coincides with the death of Claude of France, wife of François I, whose initial appears with the king's in the plaque on one of the side borders and perhaps also in the monogram on the upper border (two Fs combined with the letter C).

A stylistic reading of the work shows that the depiction of Christ surrounded by the apostles closely resembles Leonardo's *Last Supper*. The figures and table laden with food faithfully reprise the original mural painting, despite the different medium, which is inevitably more graphic and stronger, however, the rendering of certain elements such as the flesh is more similar to the original. In fact, Leonardo's delicate brushwork and his famous *sfumato* are imitated in the tapestry by using the *hachure* technique, with which the weaver managed to create nuances and render the figures almost “human”. An exceptionally high technical quality is displayed in the depiction of the bread, fruit and vessels, and those refined small “still lifes” on the table. Incredible skill is also evident in the interweaving of silver and gold threads to create the transparent effect of the jug and glasses, the almost reflecting surface of the plates and knife. The various poses of the twelve apostles gathered around the Lord's table for the last time, agitated, questioning each other and gesticulating, converge on the central figure of Christ, reprising the “motions of the soul” in the famous mural painting.

But the scene is set in a completely different space and time: no longer Milan but France, no longer the end of the 15th century but years later, in the 1520s.

The tapestry retains only a faint echo of the severe Leonardo backdrop, the decorated wall panels in the mural painting are evoked in the two luxuriant *millefleurs* side panels.

The three ornate arches in the background are a far cry from Leonardo's square openings. They are supported by decorated pillars bearing pairs of "dwarf" columns with richly sculpted capitals, surmounted by an architrave adorned with a lively frieze of griffins and shells in tones of red and yellow, above which runs a multiple serrated cornice with ovules. Above the balustrade you can discern buildings that call to mind Lombard and Milanese Renaissance architecture, Bramante, colleague and friend of Leonardo, but also an eclectic architect and sculptor like Giovanni Antonio Meda and the French castles of the Loire, which François and Louise stayed in and loved so dearly.

Visible between the arches is a verdant landscape, punctuated with a hilltop castle and buildings whose gable roofs echo a northern style, and a small stream with colourful hills and mountains on the horizon (cat. 22.a).

The scene, therefore, seems to speak a mixed language of Italian and French and even perhaps some Flemish.

The golden halo barely discernible behind Christ's head has a somewhat graceful and "discreet" northern flavour.

By contrast, the borders take us back to Italy and Rome in particular. To the fashion for grotesques, which were studied and copied in the *Domus Aurea* by countless artists, who through their drawings rapidly disseminated this language through northern Italy and beyond the Alps.

On the side borders, the composition, divided in two by the salamander in flames set in a kind of goblet, reprises the traditional *candelabra* motif, enlivened by weird creatures: menacing dolphins transformed into volutes, griffins, half-length women and winged, chained satyrs facing each other, birds, small snakes, in a plethora of decorative elements that include two pairs of interwoven wings, Louise's omnipresent emblem. On the horizontal borders, on either side, float the elegant figures of curving dolphins that seem to open and close a kind of dance of plant motifs, racemes and flowers, accompanied by strange birds, while the two salamanders in flames associated with François I are flanked by the outspread wings of his mother's

emblem.

The widespread diffusion of these ornamental motifs borrowed from ancient Rome was very varied and pervasive thanks to the flourishing market of drawings, engravings and prints, which spread this new style far and wide. Thus, this 16th-century decorative engraving, marked by the revival of antiquity, rapidly began to influence all the arts in Europe.<sup>34</sup> The artists gravitating around Andrea Mantegna were among the first ambassadors of this style. They included Giovanni Antonio da Brescia, Nicoletto da Modena and Agostino Veneziano who engraved with a burin ornamental subjects taken from the *Domus Aurea* and reprised in the most imaginative and bizarre variants.<sup>35</sup>

Nicoletto da Modena, was the first engraver to use grotesques as a subject in their own right,<sup>36</sup> and the closest in style to the borders of the tapestry, as Laure Fagnart<sup>37</sup> has already pointed out. Painter, engraver, draughtsman and a maker of models for artists' studios, Nicoletto was in Rome in 1507, when he wrote his name on a wall in the *Domus Aurea*, Nero's magnificent Golden House on the Esquiline Hill. His many ornamental panels inspired by the ancient palace contributed to spreading this kind of decoration to northern Europe, where they were copied by numerous engravers.<sup>38</sup>

The borders of the tapestry also reproduce decorative motifs often used by Nicoletto, as in the case of the famous two satyrs chained facing each other. The most obvious example is an ornamental panel designed by Nicoletto, though it is perhaps more crowded, where the satyrs appear on a *candelabrum*<sup>39</sup> just as in the tapestry. The idea of the two dolphins bearing a *candelabrum* is a device that is also found both in another decorative panel by the artist<sup>40</sup> and on the side borders of the tapestry.<sup>41</sup> In actual fact, a close examination of the artist's production reveals many similar ornamental<sup>42</sup> and architectural motifs, for instance, in the study with grotesques, griffins and birds in the British Museum in London<sup>43</sup> and in the case of the double small columns surmounting the capital of a pillar in the image of *Pallas* that are similar to the "dwarf" columns in the tapestry.<sup>44</sup>

Grotesques and ornamental motifs akin to those in the Vatican tapestry are also to be found in the repertoire of the Lombard miniaturist Giovan Pietro Birago, who was one of the engravers of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, and whose influence was felt in France as early as the first half of the 16th century.<sup>45</sup>

Thus different influences can be found in this precious tapestry, though it remains strongly Leonardesque, so much so as to suggest that there was likely a model or cartoon made in

France during Leonardo's final stay there towards the end of his life, or perhaps he was involved in supervising the actual work. We know that Leonardo went to Amboise in Autumn 1516 and at the end of November he was at Clos-Lucé. It would be tempting to think that it was the master himself, the *Peintre du Roy*<sup>46</sup> who designed or perhaps supervised the model of the work, thus transferring his masterpiece, *mutatis mutandi*, to a northern, courtly Renaissance setting. We do not know who was entrusted with the difficult task of making the cartoon; it is undocumented and remains lost in the twists and turns of history. In any event, the tapestry contains evident echoes of Leonardo's drawings, for instance, his knots, and his sketches of landscape and architecture that intriguingly seem to reappear in the architectural backdrop of the tapestry, which skilfully combines elements of Italian and French architecture.

On the other hand, there already existed copies of *The Last Supper*, which could have been referred to, belonging to the court entourage. These included the copy now lost commissioned from Bramantino by Antoine Tourpin, general treasurer of the duke of Milan in 1503; the one by Marco d'Oggiono executed for Gabriel Gouffier in 1506 (now in the Musée National de la Renaissance in Ecuen); *The Last Supper* in the refectory of the monastery of the Cordeliers de Blois (now in the museum in Blois); the copy for Cardinal Georges d'Amboise and finally the one in Troyes executed for Guillaume Petit or Parvy, bishop of Troyes, datable to around the 1520s.<sup>47</sup>

The anonymous maker of the cartoon may have had recourse to these in executing the model. He was an artist who, in respectfully reprising the venerated *Last Supper* by Leonardo, displays great personality and flair – perhaps even courage – in placing the composition in a completely new setting. This in part disrupts the master's sober and austere rendition by drawing ideas from the art of northern Italy, either known first hand or from prints and engravings, and perhaps from drawings by Leonardo himself.

Fagnart, at the suggestion of Marani, puts forward the idea that the model may have been the lost Bramantino copy, through the date (1503) is perhaps too early. However, despite difficulty in reading the work due to its poor state of preservation, a certain similarity may be found in the French-style architecture in the Blois copy.<sup>48</sup> An engraving from northern Italy reprises the Leonardo composition, though in an architectural setting of three large arches opening onto a landscape reminiscent of the Vatican tapestry.<sup>49</sup> Delmarcel sees in the tapestry a synthesis of this engraving and the copy of *The Last Supper* in Tongerlo Abbey.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, a drawing formerly attributed to Palma il Giovane, is the only known depiction, albeit partial, of the tapestry.<sup>51</sup>

Due to lack of documentation, it is difficult to identify the author of the model or cartoon, though of the many artists gravitating around the refined French court, one in particular comes to mind: Matteo del Nassaro, a multifaceted personality, painter, engraver, musician and lute player.<sup>52</sup> Originally from Verona, Vasari writes: “Andatosene poi in Francia, dove portò seco molte cose di sua mano, perché gli facessero luogo in corte del re Francesco Primo, fu introdotto a quel signore, che sempre tenne in conto tutte le maniere de’ virtuosi”. He was a skilful, much admired engraver of medals, stones and cameos and Vasari continues, “Fece Matteo per lo medesimo re molti cartoni per panni d’arazzo, e con essi, come volle il re, bisognò che andasse in Fiandra e tanto vi dimorasse che fussono tessuti di seta e d’oro. I quali finiti e condotti in Francia, furono tenuti cosa bellissima.”<sup>53</sup> He made the 92 stories (models for tapestries) with scenes inspired by Virgil’s *Bucolics* for a *chambre de parade* of Louise of Savoy,<sup>54</sup> now lost and unfortunately only known from descriptions. Although there is no definite information available on Nassaro’s first years in France, he must have already been there in 1515–1516, as we assume from two medals commemorating the Battle of Marignano, attributed to him and made in 1515.<sup>55</sup> He was certainly still there some years later in 1521, when he was paid for the cartoons for the tapestries depicting the *Bucolics*. Documents record his presence in France even later in the 1530s, when he was referred to as *peintre, graveur et valet de chambre du roi* (1538–1539) and he remained there until his death in c. 1547, apart from a brief interval in Verona during the period of François I’s imprisonment following his defeat at Pavia (1525). Unfortunately this tempting hypothesis cannot be corroborated by documentary or stylistic evidence given the paucity of drawings by the artist. However, a certain hardness in the features of the apostles might lead us to vaguely support it.

The only document possibly referring the tapestry in question may link it to the Château d’Amboise, one of the royal residences used most frequently during the early years of the reign, and which Louise refurbished and modernized. This can be seen from a letter dated 26 April 1521, in which she asks her treasurer Guillaume Ruzé to “tenir le compte et faire le paiement de l’amesnaigement, meubles, vaisselle d’argent, tapisserie de fil d’or, d’argent et soye, broderies, habitz et garnitures de chapelle, aussi garniture de chambre et cabinetz et autres choses que avons fait faire et achapter depuis trois ans.”<sup>56</sup> Among these “tapisserie de fil d’or, d’argent et

soye” may refer to the Vatican tapestry, which may have been made in Amboise during those years when Leonardo was a guest at the nearby Château de Clos-Lucé.

In actual fact, the border with the grotesques and the Italian-French style architecture might perhaps suggest a later date around 1520–1525, as might the initials “FP” (*Françoisiscus Primus?*)<sup>57</sup> below the hand of Christ might attribute the idea of the tapestry to François I himself.

If the name of the artist who made the cartoon remains elusive, so too does the location where the tapestry was produced, which is generally recorded as being Flanders,<sup>58</sup> a place renowned for the production of exquisite tapestries. In fact, the historian Paolo Giovio in his *Histoires sur les choses faictes et advenues en son temps en toutes les parties du Monde*, in recounting the exchange of gifts between Pope Clement VII and François I in 1533, writes of “*une très large tapisserie : en laquelle; faict à ouvrages de Flandres; on voyait la dernière Cène de Jesus Christ avec ses Disciples, rehaussée d’or dessus soye.*”<sup>59</sup>

This would not seem strange given that the both the king and his mother Louise had a great love for the works produced by the Flemish manufactories, particularly in Brussels, where the finest pieces came from, including among others the famous series from the Peter van Aelst manufactory *The Acts of Apostles*, woven for Pope Leo X from cartoons by Raphael, which arrived in Rome between mid-1519 and 1521.

The heir of an impressive collection of tapestries, François was born and raised under the aegis of a mother who was highly refined and a lover of fabrics, textiles and wall hangings. He fully absorbed the taste instilled in him by this maternal figure, becoming one of the keenest and most innovative commissioners of tapestries, not only to enhance his royal splendour but to possess that Italian art he so coveted. Indeed it was thanks to the highly refined production of these wall hangings that Italian Renaissance art with all its striking novelty burst the boundaries of Italy like a tornado and irrevocably changed the course of art beyond the Alps.

Together with his mother, already before but even more so after his ascent to the throne, François became a keen collector of tapestries, with a view to establishing a refined, humanist court characterized by innovations in Italian and international art.<sup>60</sup> The 1551-1552 inventory of the royal *Garde Meuble* ordered by Henry II, approximately reproducing an earlier document drawn up in 1542,<sup>61</sup> records a prodigious quantity of textiles of all kinds from the *chambres de parade*, furnished with highly prized fabrics, to the carpets, gold drapes, cloths woven with silver thread, fabrics of all kinds and tapestries inherited from his father. Indeed, François possessed extraordinary works including the first replica (1534) of the famous *Acts of the Apostles* and the

*Stories of Scipio* (1532) series, woven from drawings by Giulio Romano and Giovan Francesco Penni.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, François owned the *editio princeps* of many other important series of the time, such as the stories of Saint Paul (purchased in 1531) and the stories of Joshua (1538), both from drawings by Pieter Coecke van Aelst. The king also bought tapestries featuring paintings by Bosch and sent drawings for woven wall hangings to Brussels. In 1533, the painter Primaticcio was sent to Pieter Pannemaker's workshop in Brussels where, as he himself recounts, he saw thirty workers weaving six large tapestries in gold, silver and silk for the king of France.<sup>63</sup> The crowning glory of this passion was the creation of a tapestry workshop at Fontainebleau, in the 1530s–1540s, where the king established an actual court of Italian artists including Primaticcio and Rosso Fiorentino.

François I must have been not only a great lover of this art, but also a connoisseur who liked to display his expert knowledge in public, for instance, during a banquet at the Louvre, when he launched into a passionate speech on the quality of the papal tapestries designed by Raphael and the *Stories of Scipio* series, which is reported by the ambassador of Venice.<sup>64</sup>

*The Last Supper* tapestry was of vital interest to François since it reproduced one of the supreme masterpieces of Italian art, woven in silk gold and silver, which he passionately sought and craved. But political interest probably overrode any great passion. Hence, François decided to give one of the most extraordinary works of the weaving art to Pope Clement VII.

This tapestry, which appears in the Vatican for the first time in the *Floreria Apostolica* inventories in 1536, is regularly recorded during the following years. The antique wall hanging was displayed at important religious festivals like Corpus Christi, a spectacular ceremony involving a procession, when *The Last Supper* was exhibited together with tapestries designed by Raphael, and at the traditional Washing of the Feet that took place on Maundy Thursday in the ancient, magnificent Sala Ducale, in the heart of the Apostolic Palace.

The solemn Corpus Christi procession left the Sistine Chapel, went through the Hall and down the Scala Regia through St Peter's colonnade and part of the old Borgo to reach the other side of the colonnade where it entered the basilica. "Tutto questo tratto di vestiboli, i colonnati e la strada" was "addobbato con magnificenza ed ecclesiastica pompa".<sup>65</sup> Elaborate decorations<sup>66</sup> accompanied the procession, awnings covered the whole route as protection from the sun or bad weather, tapestries and coats of arms of the pope and cardinals, painted and decorated floral motifs, covered the large beams that supported the awnings. The windows and loggias of the buildings lining the route were decked with red damask. The Scala Regia, its noble vestibule

and the corridor were embellished with some of the most precious tapestries in the papal collection, including the one of *The Last Supper*, to honour the pope and the Holy Sacrament as they passed, followed by the entire Curia Romana and acclaimed by a crowd of people from every social extraction.<sup>67</sup>

The ancient solemn rite of the Washing of the Feet – according to sources<sup>68</sup> – was performed on Maundy Thursday in the Sala Ducale in the heart of the Apostolic Palace. The pope, dressed in white and wearing an apron, in a choreographed ceremony, washed the feet of the “thirteen” apostles, who were priests also dressed in white and were presented with bouquets of flowers and gold and silver medals. A select and elite audience was admitted to the ceremony, also including some ladies, who watched from choir stalls built especially for the purpose and from the windows of adjacent rooms. The hall was adorned with damasks embroidered in gold and the magnificent tapestry of *The Last Supper*,<sup>69</sup> which was hung directly above the platform where the “thirteen apostles” were seated. After centuries, the figure of Pope Clement VII still hovered evocatively over the ceremony, not only in the precious tapestry, but also in that *aula tertia*, the original nucleus of the Sala Ducale, which was renovated by Pope Clement. But, going through the twists and turns of history, our thoughts return to François I, the generous donor of the antique tapestry on the wall of this room, whose emblems of France reminded those present of the *Rex Cristianissimus* and his former alliance with the pope.

It was probably due to the use of the tapestry in these ceremonies and its fragility, since it was made entirely of threads of silk and silvered and gilded metal, that it began to deteriorate. As early as 1681 we hear of a lengthy restoration carried out by the tapestry maker Lamberto Laplanche, who worked continuously on the *Supper of Christ with the Twelve Apostles* (mistakenly attributed to Raphael) receiving a monthly payment for a whole year.<sup>70</sup> Around a hundred years later, in 1763, it became necessary to replace the tablecloth, which was shaded and painted “a mo’ dell’antica” by the painter Stefano Pozzi.<sup>71</sup> But evidently its condition worsened to such a degree that, in order to preserve the fragile tapestry, it was decided to make a copy to be used in its stead.

Thus, in 1780, in the reign of Pope Pius VI, the tapestry maker Felice Cettomai, director of the Pontificia Manifattura di San Michele, was entrusted with the task of making an exact replica. Documents inform us that “lo sbiadimento delle tinte ed il deterioramento dei contorni p[er] essere lacero e allentato” were such that it was necessary to make an oil painting to be used as a model. This work, still in the Vatican today, was executed by the painter Bernardino Nocchi

who in 1783 was paid for the oil painting<sup>72</sup> and the cartoon for the tapestry.<sup>73</sup> The copy was begun by Cettomai,<sup>74</sup> however, due to the tapestry maker's death in 1783, it was completed by his widow Anna Maria Gramignoli and son Gerolamo, who finished it in 1795. According to sources, for this demanding work they were paid "molti denari" to cover not only the actual labour, but also the materials ("lana, seta e capicciole e altro"), as well as the rent of the house where the family lived and did the weaving.<sup>75</sup>

The tapestry is a faithful copy of the antique one, though the emblem of Pius VI and the papal coat of arms, replace the salamanders and coat of arms of the king of France.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, it was possible to conserve the antique and iconic tapestry, by using the new one in the traditional ceremonies and on other occasions. For instance, on 6 July 1902, when Pope Leo XIII imparted a blessing and it was displayed in the Cortile del Belvedere, and when it was raised in front of St Peter's Basilica like an altarpiece, on 25 July 1929, a few months before the signing of the Lateran Pacts, and in the presence of His Holiness Pius XI a Eucharistic procession involving a large crowd of people took place as a sign of "reconciliation".

Finally, I recently unearthed another copy of the antique tapestry in the Floreria Pontificia. It is smaller in size, executed in "succo d'erba" (namely, painting on canvas), in the Rome workshop of Erulo Erolì and datable to the mid-19th century.

While in the collective imagination the fatal attraction has been and still is the Raphael tapestries that have aroused amazement and admiration, *The Last Supper* tapestry did not go unnoticed by the refined artist and draughtsman Pierre Paul Prud'hon, who wrote enthusiastically to his master François Devosge, from Rome in 1785, after seeing Raphael's famous tapestries, but also "une quinzième tapisserie qui représente une Cène, d'après Léonard de Vinci. Lorsqu'on est devant, on demeure immobile d'admiration, on ne peut se lasser de regarder, et, lorsqu'on a bien vu chaque figure en particulier, on avoue que jamais Raphaël ny le Poussin, qui ont traité plusieurs fois ce sujet, n'ont approché de celui-ci dans l'expression."<sup>77</sup>

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I dedicate this study to Natalia Maovaz, a refined fabric restorer no longer with us.

I should like to thank Pietro Marani and Laure Fagnart for the fruitful exchange of ideas. Special thanks go to my invaluable, ever-present and stimulating colleagues Camilla Fiore and Michela Gianfranceschi. Also a big thank you to my friends Adele Breda, Cristina Pantanella and Marta Bezzini for reading this text and for their useful suggestions. I am also very grateful to Adriano Amendola for sharing his ideas with me and to Nello Forti Grazzini for the interesting comparison.

<sup>1</sup> The description of the pope's journey and stay in Marseilles is reported by the Master of Ceremonies Biagio Martinelli in some pages titled *Itineratio seu potius peregrinatio tertia Clementis Pape VII versus Gallia*, held by the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana in the codex Barb. Lat. 2801, ff. 187r–208r. On the sea voyage of Clement VII see Guglielmotti, 1876, 348–361.

<sup>2</sup> De Valbelle, 1985, vol. 1, 242–259.

<sup>3</sup> Craveri, 2005, 21–24. The nuptials are depicted in the painting the *Marriage of Catherine de' Medici and Henry II of France*, dated 1600, in the Gallerie degli Uffizi in Florence, traditionally attributed to L'Empoli in the inventories of the Florentine museum and included in Marabottini's catalogue of the artist: Marabottini, 1988, 71; Cecchi in Natali, Proto Pisani, Sisi, Testaferrata, 2004, 226–227, no. 57; De Luca, 2006, 14, 16ff., fig. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Now in the Museo degli Argenti in Florence.

<sup>5</sup> Ulloa, 1565, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Lorizzo, (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Cox-Rearick, 1995, 79, fig. 104; Steinberg, 2001, 256; Fagnart, 2001, 168; Fagnart, 2009–2010, 161, fig. 52.

<sup>8</sup> As already noted by Cox-Rearick the drawing represents a *Last Supper* with a different iconography. Cf. Cox-Rearick, 1995, 135, 366.

<sup>9</sup> Vatican City, Vatican Museums, Pinacoteca, inv. 43789.

<sup>10</sup> De Valbelle, 1985, vol. 1, 256–257.

<sup>11</sup> F. Bournon, 'Inventaire des tapisseries emportées du château de Blois, en 1533' in *Nouvelles archives de l'art français*, 1879, 335: "Item, une autre grant pièce de tapisserie bien riche, en laquelle est contenue la Cène de Notre Seigneur Jesus-Christ par histoire et personages", cited in Erlande-Brandenburg, 1973–1974, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Marichal, 1888, vol. 2, 567–568.

<sup>13</sup> De Laborde, 1880, vol. 2, 274, no. 251.

<sup>14</sup> On the success of Leonardo's *Last Supper* in France see the texts by Fagnart, 2005; Marani, 2001; Fagnart, 2009, 313–330 and Marani in this volume with previous bibliography.

<sup>15</sup> Crick-Kuntziger, 1952, 113–126; Möller, 1952; Erlande-Brandenburg, 1973–1974, 19–31; Cox-Rearick, 1995, 79–81, 135–363, 366; Fagnart, 2001, 165–171; Fagnart, 2009, 113–130; Sforza Galitzia, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Erlande-Brandenburg, 1973–1974, 20–22 and more recently Fagnart, 2001, 165.

<sup>17</sup> Fagnart, 2009–2010, 165. The noun *aille* in French is pronounced “el” like the first letter of the name Louise.

<sup>18</sup> Crépin-Leblond and Barbier, 2015, 62.

<sup>19</sup> Townsend, 1941, 70; Erlande-Brandenburg, 1973–1974, 23 associate the salamander with the motto *Notrisco al buono Stingo el reo* on a famous medal of 1504, probably ordered by Louise of Savoy and made by Giovanni Candida.

<sup>20</sup> Paris, Musée de l'Armée, inv. 993/J 376 dated before 1514; Erlande-Brandenburg, 1973–1974, 30; Lecoq, 1987, 464–465; Fagnart, 2001, 165; Fagnart, 2009–2010, 159; Crépin-Leblond and Barbier, 2015, 66, no. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Fagnart, 2001, 170, note 5.

<sup>22</sup> Erlande-Brandenburg, 1973–1974, 23–24; Fagnart, 2001, 165; Fagnart, 2009–2010, 159.

<sup>23</sup> Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. 36.136; Dupont-Ferrier, 1935, 11–14; Townsend, 1941, 67–73; Cavallo, 1967, vol. 1, 66–68, no. 14; Salet, Souchal, 1973, 128–130, no. 47; Campbell, 2002, 143, fig. 64; Erlande-Brandenburg, 1973–1974, 19–22.

<sup>24</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale de France (henceforth BNF), Département des Estampes et de la Photographie, AD-110 (1)- FOL, fol. 85 (Gaigneres, 1). Townsend 1941, 67; Erlande-Brandenburg, 1973–1974, 24, note 6.

<sup>25</sup> Crick-Kuntziger, 1952, 113–126; Möller, 1952, 129–134; Erlande-Brandenburg, 1973–1974, 19–31; Forti Grazzini, 1990, 59; Delmarcel, 1999, 69–70, 72; Fagnart, 2001, 165–171; Campbell, 2002, 143; Fagnart, 2009–2010, 159–164; Sforza Galizia, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Although the crowned salamander only appears after François I's ascent to the throne, subsequently the king also sometimes used the uncrowned emblem, therefore this cannot be regarded as a decisive factor in the dating of the tapestry. In fact, the uncrowned salamander also appears in the interior decoration of the royal palaces of Chambord and Fontainebleau.

<sup>27</sup> On this subject see Marani's text and previous bibliography in this volume.

<sup>28</sup> The conservation restoration was carried out from February 2018 until April 2019 at the Tapestries and Textiles Restoration Laboratory of the Vatican Museums, coordinated by Chiara Pavan the head of the laboratory under the direction of the present writer (see the report in the appendix).

<sup>29</sup> François I changed "ses eguilletes en doubles cordelieres d'or, à cause qu'il s'appelloit François et pour conserver la mémoire de la reyne Anne de Bretagne, mère de la reine Claude, sa femme, qui l'en avoit prié" (BNF, ms. Clairambault 1242, p. 1419 cited in Cousseau, 2016, chapter 2, par. 6). This change is also mentioned by Erlande-Brandenburg, 1973–1974, 24, who does not connect it, however, with the Vatican tapestry. I wish to thank Laure Fagnart for her kind information, which will be published in Fagnart, (forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> Lecoq, 1987, 438–439.

<sup>31</sup> Vatican Secret Archive (henceforth ASV), *Diversa Cameralia*, 105, f. 150v, 30 January 1536.

<sup>32</sup> Droz, 1943, 43.

<sup>33</sup> The velvet border is recorded in the inventories until 1825 (ASV, *PA, Amministrazioni*, 185, f. 92) where it is said to be stored in a cupboard in the Floreria Apostolica: "Terza Camera Credenzone n. 2. Un giro di velluto con diverse lettere intagliate sopra dell'Arazzo rappresentante la cena del Signore di Leonardo da Vinci".

- <sup>34</sup> Borea, 2009, vol. 1, 85–108, with previous bibliography.
- <sup>35</sup> Dacos, 1966, 43–49.
- <sup>36</sup> Pierpaoli, 2000, 43–51.
- <sup>37</sup> Fagnart, 2001, 167.
- <sup>38</sup> On Nicoletto da Modena see Hind, 1938, 110; Licht, 1970; Licht, 1973; Zucker, 1991; Pierpaoli, 2000; Crespi, Girondi, 2001; Vandi, 2007, 86–98.
- <sup>39</sup> Print or engraving, in two copies, one of which is held by the British Museum, London, inv. 1845,0825.656 and the other by the Albertina Museum, Vienna, inv. DG 1952/412. Similar but with slight differences are the panels with two satyrs facing each other in the Cabinet des Dessins, Louvre, Paris, inv. 3928, 3929, recto, Réserve Edmond de Rothschild.
- <sup>40</sup> London, British Museum, inv. 1870, 0625.1058.
- <sup>41</sup> Another recurrent motif is that of the knots engraved on a panel by Nicoletto da Modena which is reminiscent of the Savoy and Vinci knots (Bartsch, 1984, vol. 25, 238–239, no. 2508.104).
- <sup>42</sup> A similar decorative repertoire with dolphins "swimming" in plant volutes, griffins and sphinxes is found in the drawings by the artist held by the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin (inv. 29170, 5772, 5773, 5181).
- <sup>43</sup> London, British Museum, inv. 1895,0915,787.
- <sup>44</sup> Vienna, Albertina Museum, inv. DG 1952/389; 1952/390.
- <sup>45</sup> Byrne, 1981, 72 traces Birago's influence in the choir in Chartres Cathedral (1526) and in the choir in the chapel at the Château de Gaillon, commissioned by Georges d'Amboise in 1508 (now in Saint-Denis, Paris). One of the oldest engravings of *The Last Supper* dates back to the end of the 15th century: Giovan Pietro Birago, burin, 220 x 440 mm, Vienna, Albertina, inv. 1942/57, H9 (Marani, 2001, 172–173, no. 42).
- <sup>46</sup> Cf. Villata, 1999, 265, doc. 316. He was paid 2000 scudi, Melzi was paid 800 scudi and Salai 100 scudi, the stipend covered the years 1517–1518.
- <sup>47</sup> On the copies of *The Last Supper* in France see Fagnart, 2009–2010, 151–173; Fagnart, 2014, 433–450 and the recent volume by Marani, 2018b, with previous bibliography.
- <sup>48</sup> Fagnart, 2001, 166.
- <sup>49</sup> British Museum, inv. 1845,0825.234.
- <sup>50</sup> Delmarcel, 1999, 72.
- <sup>51</sup> See cat. entry no. 19 in this volume.
- <sup>52</sup> Zannandreis, 1891, 75–77; De la Tour, 1893, 517–561; Guiffrey, 1879, 69–72; Sulzberger, 1960, 147–150; Leproux, 2001, 17–18 and 184; Castelluccio, 2002, 20.
- <sup>53</sup> Vasari, 1880, vol. 5, 375–379.
- <sup>54</sup> Fagnart, 2015, 205–218.
- <sup>55</sup> Sulzberger, 1960, 148–149.
- <sup>56</sup> Fagnart, 2015, 205–218, note 73, Amboise, Archives Communales, II 2, f. 2.
- <sup>57</sup> The initials FP (*Françoisus Primus?*) appear on the border of the series *Story of St John the Baptist* four pieces of which are held by the Patrimonio Nacional of Spain. See VITTET, 2018, 316–317.

<sup>58</sup> Crick-Kunziger, 1952, 121 (in the Belgian part); Erlande-Brandenburg, 1973–1974, 28; Delmarcel, 1999, 69; Forti Grazzini, 1990, 59; Fagnart, 2001, 167; Campbell, 2002, 143; Fagnart, 2009–2010, 161.

<sup>59</sup> Giovio, 1570, 237.

<sup>60</sup> Salet, 1973, 61–62; Cox-Rearick, 1995; Campbell, 2002, 270.

<sup>61</sup> Schneebalg-Perelman, 1971, 253–304.

<sup>62</sup> Cox-Rearick, 1995, 377; Campbell, 2002, 270–272; Vittet, 2017, 310–313.

<sup>63</sup> Cordellier and Py, 2004, 76.

<sup>64</sup> About the *Stories of Scipio* see Bacou, Jestaz, 1978.

<sup>65</sup> Moroni, 1841a, vol. 9, 49.

<sup>66</sup> Moroni, 1841b, 284–286.

<sup>67</sup> In the payments there is written: "E più pagato ad un omo, che ha fatto la guardia due giorni, et una notte, alli damaschi, et all'arazzo della cena di Nostro Signore nel Portico sotto il campanile---120", in ASV, *PA, Computisteria*, 763, f. 119r., 25 June 1758.

<sup>68</sup> F. Cancellieri, *Descrizione delle funzioni della Settimana Santa nella cappella pontificia* in various editions (1789, 1802, 1818), devotes a whole chapter to the 'Storia della famosa pittura di Leonardo da Vinci rappresentante l'Ultima Cena, ed espressa nell'arazzo che si esponeva nella sala Ducale della Lavanda', choosing for the frontispiece of the 1818 edition dedicated to Pius VII an engraving of the Leonardo *Last Supper* by Giovanni Petrini; Cancellieri, 1818, 74–80, 299–322; Moroni, 1842, 62–72.

<sup>69</sup> The 16th-century tapestry was probably used until the copy made by Felice Cettomai was delivered in 1795.

<sup>70</sup> ASV, *PA, Computisteria, Dispensiere*, 1089 in which payments are recorded from October 1681 to the same month of the following year. I wish to thank Anna Maria De Strobel for drawing my attention to the document.

<sup>71</sup> ASV, *PA, Computisteria*, 303, no. 86.

<sup>72</sup> Vatican City, Vatican Museums, inv. 41462.

<sup>73</sup> De Strobel, 1989, 70.

<sup>74</sup> Vatican City, Vatican Museums, inv. 43737.

<sup>75</sup> ASV, *PA, Computisteria*, 575, ff. 343r-344r.

<sup>76</sup> Crick-Kuntziger, 1952, 119–120; De Strobel, 1989, 65, note 75 and p. 70.

<sup>77</sup> Laveissière, 1994, 565.

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