



## PREFACE

by *Barbara Jatta*

The Vatican Museums are taking part in the fifth-centenary celebrations of Leonardo da Vinci's birth during 2019 with various initiatives. This exhibition on the precious Vatican tapestry of *The Last Supper* at the Château de Clos Lucé in Amboise is perhaps the most representative of these but also of the multifaceted activities carried out today in the Vatican Museums, encompassing research, restoration and collaboration with various institutions at a range of levels. The papal museums thus pay tribute to Leonardo's genius.

It was a pleasure and an honour to enter into contact with the French institutions and thus resume a relationship that dates back to 1533, when the renowned tapestry, sumptuously woven in silk with silver and gold thread and a border of crimson velvet, was presented to Clement VII by Francis I of France on the occasion of the marriage of his son and heir Henry of Valois and the Pope's niece Catherine de' Medici. The ceremony was performed by Clement VII himself with all due pomp in Marseille in the autumn of 1533.

The tapestry, whose origin and provenance have been the object of hypotheses and conjectures, is still so shrouded in mystery that it has even proved impossible to identify the workshop involved. The connections with Francis I and his mother Louise of Savoy are, however, unquestionable due to the various heraldic and symbolic references to the pious sovereigns.

The succession of studies carried out on the work up to the present have kept interest alive in its manufacture and its artistic, chronological and stylistic relations with the famous and iconic work painted by Leonardo in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. The tapestry is identical in size to the fresco and displays only a few iconographic differences.

One of the most precious tapestries in the pontifical collections again plays a leading part in artistic and cultural exchanges between the Vatican and France on the occasion of this exhibition, which regards events that took place in the first decades of the 16th century, a time of subtle political relations between the Church and the great reigning houses but also of solid professional and human ties between Leonardo and the French monarchs. The tapestry's return to France provides an opportunity to recount its history in the

setting of a series of major works that shed light on the historical, artistic and personal context in which Leonardo lived and worked.

Pietro Marani's felicitous proposal to introduce the public to an important work that is still insufficiently known even though it hangs in the famous eighth room of the Pinacoteca Vaticana won immediate acceptance and set the Vatican machinery in motion. First of all, Alessandra Rodolfo, the tireless curator of the tapestries and fabrics department, supervised a long and delicate project of research (arriving at new and convincing explanations) and restoration involving a host of professionals in complex operations. This was made possible by the support of the management of the Château de Clos Lucé and the Polo Mostre di Palazzo Reale in Milan.

Chiara Pavan, head of the tapestries and fabrics restoration workshop and her assistants Emanuela Pignataro, Laura Pace Morino and Viola Ceppetelli worked with skill and understanding from December 2017 to April 2019. This team of professionals has breathed new life into a wonderful tapestry reduced by its eventful past to a precarious state of preservation surprisingly similar to that of Leonardo's fresco.

The results now before our eyes are extraordinary as regards the work's chromatic renewal but also and above all the many new discoveries emerging from this complex undertaking. Examination of the back of the tapestry in connection with numerous questions raised over the last few decades and analysis of the yarns and pigments have offered some crucial answers about dating and manufacture. Excellent support for the project was provided by the Vatican scientific research department.

Archival research made it possible to retrace the history of the Vatican tapestry. Recorded in the inventories of the Floreria Apostolica as early as 1536, it was immediately recognized as an extraordinary work and often employed by virtue of its nature in the life of the Papal Curia and numerous celebrations, including the Washing of the Feet on Maundy Thursday in the Ducal Chamber and *Corpus Domini*. Evidence of the latter is provided by a painting of the second half of the 19th century by Vincenzo Marchi Morresi, where the tapestry can be seen hanging next to Bernini's equestrian statue of Constantine in the Scala Regia. The wear and tear caused by this use were such that the tapestry evidently underwent restoration as early as the 17th century and then again in the 18th, at the end of which Pius VI had a copy made, probably in order to preserve the original. The Vatican Museums now hold both the copy made by Felice Cettomai and the splendid sketch in oils on which it was based, painted by Bernardino Nocchi in 1783.

Under Leo XIII, a "prisoner in the Vatican" due to the sovereignty dispute over Rome, it was exhibited twice in the Belvedere Courtyard in July 1902, together or alternating with the copy, during the Eucharistic Congress and the reception of a delegation from Parma. The great Pius XI exhibited it again in 1929, first in July, a few months after the Lateran Treaty, during a eucharistic procession of reconciliation in St Peter's Square, and then on 13 September, again in the Belvedere Courtyard, on receiving the Catholic Youth association in the heart of the new state of the Vatican City. Together with masterpieces

by Raphael, the tapestry has hung in the Pinacoteca Vaticana since 1931 in the splendid room eight, designed by Luca Beltrami and by the directors of the period, Bartolomeo Nogara and Biagio Biagetti, as a showcase for the cream of the Vatican collections.

The crucial element of this exhibition is, however, the restoration of the tapestry and the new luminosity and visibility it has thus gained, which the management of the Vatican Museums wishes to dedicate to the memory of the late Natalia Maovaz, a great restorer of fabrics prevented only by her selfless generosity from using her skills on this precious work of art.

“Preface” to the exhibition catalogue (English and French Ed.) *Leonardo da Vinci's the last supper for Francis I, a masterpiece in gold and silk*, Amboise, Château du Clos Lucé, 7 June-2 September 2019, edited by P. C. MARANI, Skira (Paris 2019).

*Courtesy of Skira, Paris and Château du Clos Lucé - Parc Leonardo da Vinci.*