

STEPPING OUT FROM BEHIND THE TENSIONER

As a tapestry conservator, I only occasionally have a chance to see pieces I have worked on after they leave my studio. If I am fortunate enough to be involved in their installation or happen to live near a museum where the tapestries are being exhibited, I may be able to see them in situ, hanging in all their glory. This is the exception to the rule, however, and nothing I had previously done professionally could have prepared me for the experience I recently had as guest curator at the Telfair Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia.

The Telfair Museum contacted me early in 1999 as a potential candidate to select, research, and present a small show of tapestries from the collections of the Blau Gallery, Inc. and Simona Blau & Company, in New York City. Recognizing a unique professional opportunity, I jumped at the chance to work with the museum, as well as with two generations of the Blau family, who are renowned carpet and tapestry dealers. The selection of tapestries was facilitated by the Vojtech, Jolana, and Simona Blau, who brought out their finest examples for me to consider and shared decades of research and experience. Their generosity was phenomenal.

Standing in the rotunda gallery at the Telfair Museum for the first time in December 1999, I was awed by the spectacle of these thirteen works of art, some of which I had seen only in photographs. I was not alone in the gallery, for the day I arrived to prepare for the opening coincided with a huge event at the museum, called 'Tapestry Sunday.' On a stage at the back of the rotunda a choir of children was singing traditional Jewish songs, and earlier in the day the floor had been occupied by dancers. The chairs set up in the center of the room were filled with visitors getting a sneak peek at the exhibit and soaking up the holiday atmosphere.

In the nearby education galleries, children and their parents had gathered at the promise of weaving demonstrations and craft projects. No fewer than three weavers were on hand with examples of their art. Children were being taught plain weave, first using strips of paper and then on small hand looms with colorful yarn. The activities

were held together by the education staff, who engaged the families, provided patient assistance, and made everything fun.

On Monday I returned to do some last-minute installation work before the opening lecture I was to give the following night. From atop a 15-foot ladder I watched as a crocodile of nine-year-old schoolchildren filed into the gallery and sat obediently at the foot of one of the oldest tapestries in the exhibit, a late 16th-century piece entitled *Vertumnus and Pomona*. The expressions on the faces of these children, as they were told that what they were looking at was not a painting but had been woven on an enormous wooden loom where several men sat side by side, was priceless. More so than a sculpture or even a painting, this tapestry spoke to the children as they unconsciously touched their own clothes and contemplated what the fifteen miles of weft in this tapestry would look like if it were all unraveled.

In an age before television and magazines, the museum educator told the group, European tapestries like these were used to tell stories. When you visited another person's house and saw the tapestries hanging on the walls, you would probably know what the picture was about, because everyone learned the same stories and studied the same history. The story of *Vertumnus and Pomona* is about the goddess of flowering trees and a god who admired her from afar but did not know how to profess his love. After appearing before Pomona in several disguises with no success, he transformed back to himself and Pomona instantly fell in love. "What is the moral of this story?" the educator asked. From the center of the pack, a hand shot up and an African-American boy said "If you want people to like you, you have to be yourself!"

This is what tapestry is all about - the communication of ideals and ordeals and the juxtaposition of intimacy and immensity. With a single sentence, that small boy gave me something I will remember for the rest of my career.

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