

STRASBOURG

THE TAPESTRIES IN THE CATHEDRAL 1638-1657

During Advent, the Cathedral nave will display a magnificent set of 17th Century tapestries, some of the most important in France.

Commissioned by Richelieu, these fourteen works depicting the life of the Virgin, were originally intended for the choir of Notre-Dame de Paris. The Cathedral Chapter acquired them in 1739, and they have been one of its treasures ever since.

The creation of this collection bears witness to the faith and tenacity of some of the great figures in French history, the sensitivity of the artists who designed them and the skill of the weavers who made these 350 square metres of exceptional tapestries. The eventful history of the tapestries is also a fascinating summary of the history of France and of Alsace.



The tapestries in Strasbourg Cathedral are classified as Historic Monuments.

Sumptuous tapestries for the King of France

Although they bear the date 1739 and a reference to Strasbourg Cathedral ("*Sumptibus Reverendissimi et Illustrissimi Capituli Argentiniensis pro usu cathedralis ecclesiae*"), the tapestries were actually made a century earlier. For a long time, however, these references meant that they were mistakenly attributed to the Gobelins Factory (established 10 years after the tapestries were completed).



The Vow of Louis XIII, Philippe de Champaigne, 1638, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen @Wikimedia Commons

They owe their origin to the **vow** made by **Louis XIII** in 1637 to **consecrate his kingdom to the Virgin Mary** if he succeeded in restoring peace and was blessed with an heir. On this occasion, the King also promised to build a new high altar for the choir of Notre-Dame de Paris and to renew its decoration. The Paris Cathedral would therefore become a perpetual memorial of this act of consecration of France to the Virgin Mary.

The great portrait painter **Philippe de Champaigne** (1602-1674) was commissioned to paint the altarpiece (*The Vow of Louis XIII*, depicting the King offering his crown and sceptre to the Virgin).

Cardinal de Richelieu's Intervention As a good courtier eager to gain everlasting royal favour, he decided to donate a series of four **tapestries** depicting the Life of the Virgin to complete the decorative scheme. These tapestries will be **the jewel in the crown of Notre-Dame de Paris**.

The Creation of the Tapestries

Philippe de Champaigne was the Cardinal's favourite painter. It was therefore only natural that he should be entrusted with the production of the first cartoons (oil paintings used as models for tapestries). However, his contribution was limited to the cartoons for **the first two pieces**, both of which were delivered in November **1640**, two years after the King made his vow.

For around ten years, the set remained unfinished, probably due to the deaths of Richelieu in 1642 and then Louis XIII the following year, and the troubles associated with the Fronde.



The Birth of the Virgin, cartoon by *Philippe de Champaigne* (1638)
Philippe de Rexel

Thanks to Abbé Le Masle, a canon of the Cathedral, and Richelieu's steward, the hangings were not only restored to their original state, but extended from **the four pieces originally planned, to the fourteen scenes we see today**. However, the Abbé did not use Philippe de Champaigne. He chose two other important painters: **Jacques Stella** (1595-1657), a friend of Poussin, produced one cartoon of the *Marriage of the Virgin* in 1649, followed by **Charles Poerson** (1609-1667), a former assistant of Simon Vouet, who produced the eleven other cartoons between 1652 and 1657.

Within this group of works by several hands, the **differences in style** are perceptible: on the one hand, the calm majesty of Champaigne's or Stella's

subjects, on the other, the more agitated forms painted by Poerson, combined with a certain aversion to empty space. The lavish details are mainly inspired by Jacques de Voragine's '*Golden Legend*', which was an endless source of inspiration for the artists of the Middle Ages.

Despite these differences, the fourteen tapestries do form a **harmonious whole**, enhanced by their borders richly decorated with scenes of cherubs. The upper cartouches give details of the scenes from the Life of the Virgin, while the lower cartouches mention the purchase of the tapestry for Strasbourg Cathedral in September 1739. The borders also give pride of place to those who commissioned them: the initials interlaced at the top are those of Richelieu, while the coats of arms on thirteen of the fourteen tapestries are those of Michel Le Masle.

These tapestries were all made from unbleached wool threads for the warp, and coloured wool and silk for the weft. Eleven of them are **attributed to Pierre Damour**, a tapestry weaver whose mark appears on seven of them. It is estimated that he produced **a tapestry every six months** from his workshop near the Cathedral.

The Tapestries

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| 1. The Birth of the Virgin | 8. The Purification of the Virgin |
| 2. The Presentation of Mary in the Temple | 9. The Flight to Egypt |
| 3. The Marriage of Mary and Joseph | 10. Jesus among the Doctors |
| 4. The Annunciation | 11. The Wedding Feast at Cana |
| 5. The Visitation | 12. The Dormition |
| 6. The Nativity | 13. The Assumption |
| 7. The Adoration of the Magi | 14. The Coronation of the Virgin |

The tapestries depict the Joyful Mysteries of Mary's life. The Sorrowful Mysteries, such as the Descent from the Cross, were not included. It was as if those scenes, so popular in the Middle Ages, no longer had the same appeal in the refined and prosperous 17th century.

Leaving Paris

Despite its harmony and strong symbolism, the project for the choir of **Paris Cathedral was never completed**. Firstly, the painting of the royal vow was never placed on the high altar. On the other hand, because the tapestries were hung only occasionally (during major festivals), they were hardly appreciated in their entirety.

In the reign of Louis XIV, in 1699, **the tapestries became redundant** when the choir was refurbished and a more **permanent decorative scheme was created**. At that time, paintings were installed in panelling. These were permanent and dedicated to the Life of the Virgin, so the tapestries were no longer required and were removed from the Cathedral.

The tapestries were subsequently exhibited from time to time in Parisian churches, but that solution was unsatisfactory and finally led to the decision to sell them in 1730.

Although there was a lot of interest in them, it was difficult to find a buyer because they were so valuable. They were **finally acquired by the Cathedral Chapter of Strasbourg in 1739**. It was on this occasion that **the lower cartouche** on each of the pieces was woven, telling the story of the work itself and expressing the Chapter's pride in having acquired this royal ensemble.

Because of their different sizes, the tapestries, originally intended to cover the choir stalls of Notre-Dame de Paris, were used in Strasbourg to decorate the **nave of the Cathedral**, which was "promoted to the rank of extended choir", contributing, perhaps unwittingly, to the revaluation of the laity, two centuries before Vatican II, according to Bernard Xibaut.

A Manifestation of French Taste in Strasbourg

It is worth adding a few words about the background to the acquisition by Strasbourg Cathedral of hangings destined for Notre-Dame de Paris.

Strasbourg had **only been French for just over 50 years**. To consolidate his power in Alsace, which had been outside the Kingdom of France for centuries, Louis XIV determined to **make the territory both French and Catholic**. He made sure that the Cathedral, which had been under Protestant influence since the 16th century, returned to Catholic worship.

The purchase of the extremely expensive Paris tapestries was probably part of this process. The Cathedral Chapter made the decision to buy due to the influence of members of the **Rohan** family. As members of the French nobility, they were very receptive to French influences.

According to Bernard Xibaut, “the purchase of these tapestries of royal and Parisian origin was part of a **great movement to establish a royal and French tradition in Alsace, and particularly in Strasbourg**. Everything done at the Cathedral during the 18th century was directed towards this end: the choir was refurbished in the French style, and a splendid sacristy was soon built, replacing pink sandstone with white stone from Paris (...) On the eve of the French Revolution, Strasbourg **Cathedral stood out with its mix of Germanic spirit and French refinement. The tapestries made a significant contribution to that.** The Rohan family, essential instruments of royal policy, wanted to make **Strasbourg the second most important cathedral in the Kingdom of France after Notre-Dame de Paris**, and the Chapter's substantial revenues made this possible”. »

The tapestries created a link between the two cathedrals of Notre-Dame, Paris and Strasbourg, and symbolically, between Strasbourg and the Kingdom of France.

A Compendium of History

The tapestries are a **real compendium of history**. Originally, eminently **political tools**, they have remained closely linked to their historical context over the centuries.

They owe their origins to decisions of both the **King of France** and of **Cardinal Richelieu**, against a backdrop of profound faith and the major historical upheaval of the Thirty Years' War. Before being completed, the tapestries were to be affected by the deaths of Richelieu and Louis XIII and by the Fronde.



The Coronation of the Virgin, cartoon by Charles Poerson (1657)
Philippe de Rexel

Following their rejection in Paris and purchase by Strasbourg, **they became symbols of the King's policy to make Alsace French**. From then on, they followed the ups and downs of Alsatian history.

At the time of the **Revolution**, the tapestries were too big to be hidden. Fortunately, having become a Temple of Reason, the Cathedral was spared.

However, tapestries went out of fashion. In the 19th century, there was no longer a taste for concealing Gothic columns behind panelling, faux marble and tapestries. However, the tapestries did continue to adorn the nave on various feast days (particularly Corpus Christi).

Although Alsace endured three wars in less than a century, the tapestries survived all of them unscathed. During **the evacuation** of 1939, they were hidden in the Dordogne, with other works of art from Strasbourg, but the German authorities insisted on their repatriation, and the tapestries were sent to Alsace in May 1943. Listed as prime category religious art objects, they were then sent to Mont Sainte-Odile.

Since the end of the Second World War, they have been displayed in **the nave of the Cathedral from Advent to Epiphany**. They were meticulously restored in 2000. Today, they are one of the **most important symbols of Strasbourg, the Christmas capital**.

Indissolubly linked to the history of Alsace, the Cathedral tapestries have witnessed every event in the history of our region. Although originally from Paris, they are forever part of Strasbourg.

Sources: Dominique Toursel-Harster, "Les tapisseries", in Joseph Doré, Francis Rapp, Benoît Jordan, Strasbourg: *La grâce d'une cathédrale*, Strasbourg, La Nuée bleue, 2010, p. 299-310.

Bernard Xibaut, *L'histoire mouvementée des tapisseries de la cathédrale*.

Brigitte Oger and Gilbert Poinsot, *Restauration de la tenture de la vie de la Vierge*, Patrimoine restauré - Alsace, No. 7, November 2001.



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