



The FRANCES Tapestry Archive (London, United Kingdom)  
Nathan Levi (Florence, Italy)  
National Museum  
Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania (Vilnius)

INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION  
MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE  
TAPESTRY IN EUROPE  
**HISTORY WOVEN  
IN THREADS**

17 SEPTEMBER – 14 DECEMBER 2014

Exhibition patron  
Prime Minister of the Republic of Lithuania Dr ALGIRDAS BUTKEVIČIUS



▲ A unique panel of giant leaf tapestry,  
Southern Netherlands, circa 1500

On 17 September 2014, a truly great international exhibition was opened at the National Museum – Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, entitled ‘Medieval and Renaissance Tapestry in Europe. History Woven in Threads’. It is shown in the reconstructed historic state rooms, over four halls (almost 1,000 square metres) on the third floor of the museum.



▲ Proto-giant leaf tapestry with camels and riders, Southern Netherlands, Tournai (?), Wallonia, after 1500

Visitors are able to see some very old and valuable examples of large-scale textile art from the late 15th and 16th centuries. These are works from the dawn of the art of tapestry

weaving in the Middle Ages to its flourishing during the Renaissance. It is rare that a museum agrees to loan such old tapestries (some are over 500 years old), which are so sensitive to changes in the micro-climate. Their display in their permanent locations is also restricted. Such early tapestries (from the 16th century) can only be found in Lithuania in the collection of the



▲ Tapestry depicting two figures and an attendant with a hawk on a *millefleurs* ground, France, early 16th century



▲ *Life at Court*, Southern Netherlands, Brussels or Tournai (?), circa 1520

National Museum – Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania (11 pieces), while other museums have textiles only from the 17th to the 19th centuries. The 34 tapestries brought to Lithuania for this exhibition belong to private collections in Italy, the United Kingdom, and other European countries, and the United States of America.

Most of the early tapestries presented here come from the FRANCES Tapestry Archive (London, United Kingdom) and the collection of Nathan Levi (Florence, Italy). Simon Franes and Nathan Levi, both famous collectors, researchers and antique specialists, have selected the tapestries for this exhibition in Vilnius.



▲ *The Coronation*, Brussels, Flanders, Southern Netherlands, circa 1515–1520

The exhibition is showing tapestries that were woven in important textile centres in the Southern Netherlands (Belgium), France and Italy in the late 15th and 16th centuries. They

adorned churches and the residences of many European monarchs, nobles and Church leaders in the 16th to the 18th centuries. Textile art like this also adorned the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania in the Lower Castle in Vilnius from the early 16th century, and it was later collected by Lithuanian nobles and by Vilnius Cathedral.



▲ Detail from *The Betrothal of Pelops (Son of Tantalus) and Hippodamia*, Brussels, Flanders, Southern Netherlands, circa 1540

Thanks to the cartoons by famous artists, and the opulence of the materials used in weaving the tapestries (such as silk, wool, and strands

of noble metals), and thanks to the skill of the makers and the intricate details and the tireless hours of work involved, early tapestries are treasured as much as works made of precious metals, both today and when they were made, which is why they can be compared to gold.



▲ The Great Pyramid of Ghiza and Rhodopis and King Psammetichus (from the series *The Seven Wonders of the World*), Brussels, Flanders, Southern Netherlands, second half of the 16th century

In the 15th to the 18th centuries, tapestries enhanced the prestige of a ruler, a state or a dynasty, whose special status they highlighted. Sigismund the Old, Sigismund Augustus, and Sigismund and Ladislaus Vasa, the kings of Poland and grand dukes of Lithuania, assembled the richest and most impressive collection of textile art in all of Europe. The collection

comprised approximately 600 pieces. The cost of one set of tapestries acquired by Sigismund Augustus is a testimony to the special artistic and material value of the collection of the rulers of Lithuania and Poland. It was equal to the annual budget for the mid-16th century Livonian War. So the international exhibition 'Medieval and Renaissance Tapestry in Europe. History Woven in Threads' is an excellent opportunity to reflect on and actualise the history and the heritage of the early Lithuanian state, and its longstanding ties with other European countries and important centres of culture and art in Europe.

The subjects featured in the early tapestries in the exhibition at the National Museum – Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania are very varied. They show the most important themes reflected in late 15th and 16th-century textiles. In the tapestries presented in this exhibition, skilled weavers portrayed scenes from Late Gothic and Renaissance European courtly life, floral (*millefleurs*) and giant leaf compositions, landscapes, mythological, historical and biblical scenes, and heraldic symbols. Some of the exhibition's tapestries were commissioned by and belonged to famous historical figures or noble families. For example, one impressive heraldic tapestry was owned by the Velascos, one of the most famous noble families in Spain, while the tapestry *Pentecost* belonged to the Italian Cardinal Alessandro Ottaviano, from the famous Medici family of Florence (he later became Pope Leo XI). Some of the exhibition's tapestries once belonged to famous 20th-century



▲ *The Hunt of Diana*, Enguien, Wallonia, Southern Netherlands, second half of the 16th century, probably from the workshop of Filips van der Cammen

aristocrats and collectors: for example, the tapestry *The Triumph of Avarice* belonged to the American Randolph Hearst, while *The Betrothal of Pelops (Son of Tantalus) and Hippodamia* was owned by the Duke of Sutherland, and was later acquired by John Paul Getty.

A large number of the tapestries in the exhibition have never been publicly displayed before, so this is the first opportunity for

people in Lithuania and from other countries to view them. The exhibition is opened in the National Museum – Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, and there are plans for this unique collection to make its way to other famous museums in Europe. In cooperation with the exhibition partners, the National Museum – Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania also prepared a comprehensive catalogue of the tapestries shown, in English and Lithuanian. A series of cultural and educational events



▲ Detail from *Game Park*, Southern Netherlands, Brussels (?), Flanders, circa 1580

are accompanying the exhibition, and visitors are able to take part in special educational programmes.

As the tapestries belong to private collectors, it might be possible for some to be purchased.

The National Museum – Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania nurtures the hope that there will be generous patrons in Lithuania who will acquire one or a few of these unique early tapestries and donate them to the museum. Not only will this enrich the museum's collection, which is already the most valuable and richest



tapestry collection in Lithuania, numbering 25 examples, but it will also enhance Lithuania's national collection of European heritage in general, with these especially valuable and subtle works of early European fine textile art.

- ▲ *The Panther* (from the series *Animals in Landscapes*), Southern Netherlands, Brussels (?), Flanders, circa 1590
- ▶ Juan Fernández de Velasco Armorial Tapestry, Brussels, Flanders, Southern Netherlands, late 16th century



#### Exhibits lenders

The FRANSES Tapestry Archive (London, United Kingdom)

Nathan Levi (Florence, Italy)

Private collectors (Europe, USA)

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#### Exhibition sponsors





*National Museum – Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania  
4 Katedros Sq., Vilnius*

*Opening hours*

*Tuesday – Friday 11 am – 6 pm*

*Saturday, Sunday and before national holidays 11 am – 4 pm*

*Closed on Mondays and national holidays*

*Last visitors admitted one hour before the museum closes*

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*Cover: Detail from The Triumph of Avarice  
(from the series The Path to Honour), Brussels, Flanders,  
Southern Netherlands, circa 1520*

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