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1998

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Camille Myers Breeze

*American Textile History Museum, Textile Conservation Center, Lowell, MA*

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Myers Breeze, Camille, "Investigating the Origins of the Raphael Tapestries at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine" (1998). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 149.

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## Investigating the Origins of the Raphael Tapestries at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine

by  
Camille Myers Breeze

This Site Seminar will focus on research into the location and date of manufacturing of a suite of eight English tapestries depicting "The Acts of the Apostles". The tapestries were donated to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in 1954 by Louise Brugieres of Newport, RI and New York, NY and have hung in the bays of the nave since that time. Based on cartoons designed by Raphael for Pope Leo X in 1516, they are among fifty-five full or partial copies known of the original tapestries woven for the lower walls of the Sistine Chapel. Seven of the original cartoons were purchased for Charles I in 1623, brought to England, and subsequently copied. At least one set of cartoons was sent to the Mortlake Royal Manufactory, where under the direction of Sir Francis Crane weaving began. Following the period of civil war in England and the restoration of King Charles II in 1660, tapestry weaving declined dramatically. By the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Mortlake Royal Manufactory had dissolved and many of its weavers sought work in other workshops in Soho, London. The Cathedral's Raphael tapestries were always assumed to be among the dozen or so sets of Raphael tapestries woven at the Mortlake Royal Manufactory, despite the lack of written records or the existence of a weavers mark. What is known is that these eight tapestries were commissioned by Dennis Finch, Earl of Nottingham, and delivered in 1701. Correspondence between the Earl of Nottingham and a weaver, Steven Demay documents not only this date but the Earl's specific instructions on how to extend the dimensions of certain tapestries to fit the size requirements the rooms in his house, Burley-on-the-Hill. These letters have led us to believe that Steven Demay may have been in possession of his own set of cartoons and, in spite of his known connections with Mortlake Royal Manufactory, was in charge of his own weaving studio near London by the year 1700. Although the possibility exists that the tapestries were started at the Mortlake Royal Manufactory and merely completed to specification by Demay, technical examination suggests that they were woven in their entirety by Demay, making them the oldest known copy of the original Raphael tapestries.

Camille Myers Breeze is currently an Advanced Mellon Fellow at the American Textile History Museum, Textile Conservation Center, Lowell, MA where she is researching tapestry conservation techniques in the United States. Prior to that she spent five years as Assistant Conservator at the Textile Conservation Laboratory, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, specializing in the conservation of tapestries and Pre-Columbian textiles. She has published on both subjects, including a 1996 article entitled "The History of Tapestry Conservation and Exhibition at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine." Ms. Breeze has also worked at the Textile Conservation Workshop, South Salem, NY and the Intermuseum Conservation Association, Oberlin, OH. She has a BA in Art History from Oberlin College. and an MA in Museum Studies: Costume and Textile Conservation from the Fashion Institute of Technology.