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## **RAPHAEL'S ACTS of the APOSTLES TAPESTRIES - THE BIRTH of the TAPESTRY REPRODUCTION SYSTEM**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

As a younger fiber artist at the beginning of my teaching career, I rarely found European tapestries of the 16th through 18th c. to be more than copies of paintings in a woven mask. The weaver's hand and spirit were only apparent in finite details which were resplendent with meticulous hatching, shading, and delicate slit work, unchanged from the Medieval past. But it was against my art school training to separate art concept from process. I wasn't ready to accept that the weavers were not the artists, and that tapestry was in fact an industry.

More recently, my point of view has shifted. The curriculum I work with is centered around design for industry as well as fiber art, and with that dual focus comes an understanding of the current textile industry structure. Parallels to the tapestry industry of 400 years ago are interesting to note, for both are ultimately concerned with design and manufacture dependent on market demand.

As a result I have developed an appreciation for and a desire to know more about historical tapestry production. Factors which aided in the lengthy popularity of this manufactured art form point again and again to a unique union of the art market and industry. This unique union allowed duplicate versions of Raphael's tapestry cartoons from the Acts of the Apostles series to remain rich and important elements in the history of tapestry despite their being manufactured as much as a century apart.

In this presentation I will first briefly outline the rise of the European tapestry industry of the 16th and 17th c. as it entered into a period of highly profitable business. Secondly I will concentrate on the Raphael designed tapestries commissioned for the Sistine Chapel in 1515, a major commission which helped expand and sustain the tapestry industry, setting the precedent for cartoon editing, composition alteration, and reproduction of images.

### **RISE of the EUROPEAN TAPESTRY INDUSTRY**

The art of European tapestry developed from almost humble roots. The earliest examples before the time of the Renaissance served as visual enlightenment and social commentary through narrative scenes of mural proportions and skillful weaving. Large scale tapestry was recognized as the medium of choice for visual commemoration and celebration, in noble domestic and religious settings.

The early industry centered in France and Flanders was built on a foundation of true collaboration between painter, workshop director, weaver and dyer, relationships which were supported by the established guild network of the 14th century. During this early period of production, tapestry weaving workshops were often assembled at the point of the commission with expert weavers and loom builders relocating to work with the patron-appointed painter who would design the cartoons.

The centers of Flemish tapestry production, the most successful of which was Brussels, had workshops that were more formally established. The tapestry workshop director was a weaver who had come up through the ranks from apprentice through master weaver and had also learned skills of business and trade. Tapestry had always been a very expensive visual art form and therefore the opportunities for profitable business were soon recognized by workshop director/entrepreneurs as public demand for tapestry increased.

By the late 15th-early 16th centuries tapestry was competing with the rising popularity of Renaissance painting. Patrons began to demand that tapestry resemble the painterly style of a cartoon more closely, and the weaver's "hand" in interpreting cartoons was lost. Weaving directors and cartoon painters openly competed with each other for authority within the workshop, which resulted in the establishment of strict laws and regulations as early as the 1450s, outlining their individual duties to regulate workshop quality and maintain reputation <sup>1</sup>.

After 1525 tapestry production escalated. By this time in Brussels alone 15,000 people were employed in the making of tapestry. Workshops employed weavers according to their technical specialization for weaving faces, drapery, landscape, or architectural details. Concerns about tapestry representing one-of-a-kind images did not seem important to wealthy patrons and European heads of state wanting to keep their tapestry collections current, or for those who used tapestry to impress. In the 1660's Louis XIV was well known for sending 14 piece reproduction sets of his Gobelins woven Life of the King series as gifts to other European leaders.

The practice of reproducing and editing pre-existing cartoons increased in proportion to the demand for tapestry <sup>2</sup>. Reproduction eliminated the considerable expense of the artist/designer in the production process<sup>3</sup> and allowed a wealthy patron accessibility to a tapestry cartoon connected to a notable commission, and designs by a prominent artist.

## THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES TAPESTRY COMMISSION

The commission of Raphael's Acts of the Apostles tapestries in 1515 effected the growth and prosperity of the European tapestry industry. Their manufacture in Brussels came at the height of the Flemish tapestry industry's prosperity, a time of their most lavish and skillful production. Owing to the stature of this commission tapestry reproduction and cartoon reuse became highly acceptable business practices.

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1. R. d'Hulst, Flemish Tapestries from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century. New York, 1967, xix ff. By 1472 regulations outlining the boundaries of the weaver/workshop directors and painters were introduced and strictly enforced with workshop directors allowed to make design alteration to portions of cartoons involving trees, animals, boats, grass, details of drapery, landscape or borders, changing or completing the cartoon with charcoal, chalk, or pen and ink only. If major figures, faces, or primary compositional adjustments in paint were required, a cartoon painter would have to be employed. Later the number of competitive workshops escalated and production shortcuts such as hand painting of faces and details on the woven surface or use of inferior quality threads and dyes also had to be legally outlawed.

2. d'Hulst, xxi. Tapestry reproduction was a rare occurrence before the 16th c. One recorded instance indicates that the wealthy Medici family ordered replications of tapestry from their collection from the Flemish workshop they patronized in 1462.

The ten Acts of the Apostles tapestries were commissioned by Pope Leo X to complete the decoration of the Sistine Chapel, specifically to balance the lower walls of the chapel with Michelangelo's newly completed ceiling frescoes. The commission provided Raphael a stylistic confrontation with his rival Michelangelo and exercised a tremendous influence on Renaissance art for the duration of the 16th century.

Raphael's ten tapestries which interpret events from the lives of Sts. Peter and Paul include: The Miraculous Draft of the Fishes (Luke v. 3-10); Christ's Charge to St. Peter (John xxi. 15-17); The Healing of the Lame Man (Acts iii. 1-11); The Death of Ananias (Acts v. 1-6); The Blinding of Elymas (Acts xiii. 6-12); The Sacrifice at Lystra (Acts xiv. 8-18); St. Paul Preaching at Athens (Acts xvii. 15-34); The Stoning of St. Stephen (Acts vii. 55-60); The Conversion of Saul (Acts ix. 1-7); St. Paul in Prison (Acts xvi. 23-6).

Pope Leo, formerly Giovanni de'Medici son of Lorenzo, was accustomed to high quality art, and understood decorative art tradition and convention and therefore the appropriateness of narrative tapestry in this setting <sup>1</sup>. Textile representation in the form of illusionistic drapery frescoes are original decoration on the Sistine Chapel's lower walls. The gold and silver frescoes describing shadows and folds of hanging damask drapery are interlaced with the emblems of Pope Sixtus IV, Leo's predecessor. It is this lower course of the chapel, beneath the impressive frescoes of 15th c. masters such as Botticelli, Perugino, and Ghirlandaio, that would be fitted with tapestries on ceremonial occasions. The notable and highly successful Brussels tapestry workshop of Pieter van Aelst was chosen to weave the Raphael cartoons, using lavish amounts of gold and silver along with silk and wool threads. These materials, along with Raphael's renaissance vision and creative genius that guided him in designing each scene to interrelate within the context of the existing chapel interior, made the tapestries awe inspiring in 1519 when they first arrived in Rome <sup>2</sup>.

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1. C. Pietrangeli, et. al. The Sistine Chapel - The Art, the History, and the Restoration. New York, 1986, 88-91. Sixtus IV, Leo's papal predecessor who held office from 1471-84, had hung various tapestries from his collection in the Sistine Chapel on occasion, but Leo X (1455-1521) was the first to commission a set that would make a precise "fit" with the architectural and iconographic realities of the space.

2. E. Camesasca. The Paintings of Raphael, Part II. New York 1963, 34 and 121. The first seven tapestries were exhibited in the Sistine Chapel on December 26, 1519 (St. Stephen's Day). Raphael died on April 6, 1520 "...of a continuous and acute fever which he had for eight days." The total set was hung for only a short time before Leo's death in 1521. Shortly after the tapestries were mortgaged for about one-fifth of their original cost. In 1527, during the Sack of Rome the invaders sold them to merchants who burned half of Elymas to retrieve the gold, but gave up the idea of destroying the whole set when it was found more profitable to sell them in Lyon (1530). Two tapestries were not sold, ending up in Constantinople and recovered and returned to Julius III in 1553. Some of the others were hung in the Vatican again after 1545 where Titian copied the Miraculous Draft of Fishes. They were auctioned by Napoleonic invaders in 1798, withdrawn from sale and settled in Genoa, to be bought in 1808 and sold back to Pope Pius VII. Since then they have been kept in the Vatican Museum, rehung as a group in the Sistine Chapel only once, in 1983 commemorating the Year of Raphael. After 1550 however, a complete and accurate rehanging was impossible because of the completion of Michelangelo's Last Judgement on the altar wall which displaced two of the tapestries.



## THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CARTOONS

The Acts of the Apostles cartoons painted between 1515 and 1517 are said to be Raphael's only known tapestry designs and possibly his greatest works. They represent the last full scale project that he was personally responsible for carrying through before his death in 1520. The seven surviving cartoons from the commissioned set of ten compositions are on exhibition in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. They are the oldest tapestry cartoons known.

Each cartoon, ap. 12' x 15', is gouache on linen paper, designed and painted in full-scale mirror image to the intended tapestries to compensate for the design reversal which would occur in the weaving process (Figure 1).

Tapestry borders were designed as separate cartoons. Frequently workshop directors would add their personalized custom borders to the main scenes, but for this commission the borders were also designed by Raphael. They contain scenes of secular and religious events in the life of the Medici Pope, as well as scenes devoted to the arts, virtues, elements, and labors woven in a style simulating bronze relief.

It may be important to remember at this point that the tapestries were not seen side by side with the cartoons and this type of academic comparison was never intended.

## THE BRUSSELS TAPESTRY INDUSTRY and CARTOON RE-USE

By the 1520s news of the Italian Renaissance style tapestries being woven in Brussels spread quickly from agents and art buyers who frequented the tapestry fairs in Antwerp to the Northern European aristocracy who would eventually want the same tapestries for their collections. By the 17th c. it was said that the collection of an art connoisseur was not complete without at least one set of Raphael tapestries<sup>1</sup>.

As a result of this continuing demand for Raphael images, a total of fifty-five sets and partial sets of tapestry, deriving directly or indirectly from Raphael's cartoons, would be produced over the next two hundred years in weaving workshops across Europe <sup>2</sup>. Acts of the Apostles tapestries would eventually be woven from the original cartoons <sup>3</sup>, from copies made from the cartoons, and from copies made from the woven tapestries.

Five reproduction sets were woven in Brussels workshops between 1520 and 1560 from the original cartoons <sup>4</sup>. The first set of nine was probably begun before the

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1. W. Hefford. "Cardinal Mazarin and the Earl of Pembroke Tapestries," Connoisseur Magazine, August 1977, 286.

2. J. White and J. Shearman. "Raphael's Tapestries and their Cartoons (Part I)" The Art Bulletin, Fall 1958, 299-323.

3. P. Ackerman. Tapestry - The Mirror of Civilization. New York 1933, 383-386. Among others, cartoon copies have been traced to the Brussels workshops of Jan Raes, for use after 1621 and Daniel Leynier, for use in the 1650s. At least 3 full sets of cartoon copies were made by the Mortlake manufactory in England.

4. J. Shearman. Raphael's Cartoons in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen and the Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel. London 1972. (Referring to Kumsch, Die Apostelgeschichte. Dresden 1914, 11-13). The most notable 16th c. Brussels reproductions sets are the closest to Raphael's cartoons and the Vatican set. They are in Mantua, Palazzo Ducale, woven by van Aelst for Federico Gonzaga; Madrid, Patrimonio



Fig. 1.

TOP: **The Healing of the Lame Man**, Raphael cartoon, c. 1515. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
 BOTTOM: **The Healing of the Lame Man**, Brussels tapestry, van Aelst workshop, c. 1517-19.  
 Vatican Museum, Rome.

completion of the last Vatican tapestry in 1520 and was possibly a gift from Leo X to Henry VIII. This second commission could explain why the cartoons remained in Brussels after the completion of the Vatican tapestries.

In 1623 the Raphael cartoons were purchased for exclusive use at the newly established Mortlake Tapestry Manufactory in England where full sets of ten pieces would be woven twelve times between 1625 and 1703 <sup>1</sup>. Because all early Mortlake versions were woven from working copies of the original Raphael cartoons, the central compositions and Raphael style are most similar to early Brussels reproductions of 100 years earlier.

The Mortlake manufactory supplied English patrons with English tapestry. For a time in the 17th c., English law prohibited the import of European tapestry to safeguard Mortlake production. Mortlake tapestry was in effect Flemish tapestry transported across the channel. Approximately fifty Flemish immigrant weavers, including the master weaver Philip de Maecht, were employed by Mortlake in 1623. Their technical skill contributed to the superb quality of Mortlake production. As Mortlake began producing sets of Raphael tapestry, Louis XIV tried unsuccessfully to purchase the cartoons from the English manufactory for production at his Gobelins tapestry works. Not being able to acquire the original cartoons he instructed French artists in the 1660s, to make copies of the Vatican tapestries for reproduction at the Gobelins in Paris and at the tapestry workshop in Beauvais. Tapestries produced from copies of woven tapestry rather than copies of the cartoon reverse the direction of action in each composition so that the resulting tapestries are no longer mirror images of the original cartoons as intended by the artist, but instead are duplicate compositions to the original cartoons.

Between 1600 and 1700 while Acts of the Apostles tapestries were being woven at Mortlake in England and at the Gobelins and Beauvais workshops in France, production of the Acts of the Apostles never ceased in Brussels. Over this extended period of time workshop directors willingly adapted each cartoon to suit the tastes or fit the site specifications of each client wanting versions of Raphael's Acts of the Apostles, cutting compositions in two parts to fit on either side of a fireplace or doorway. For example, they added or eliminated background space and adjusted the tapestry to the height of a wall. Editing of cartoons was also done to update or "modernize" a composition, or to cut production costs by eliminating secondary groups of figures or architectural detail. Also, Raphael's cartoons were used as more general models by other artists for compositional structure or individual figure, in new tapestry designs.

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for Henry VIII in van Aelst's workshop, later in the collection of the Duke of Alba, Madrid, and then the King of Prussia. This set was destroyed during World War II. A set formerly in Paris, in the collection of King Francis I. Location of this set is unknown.

<sup>1</sup>. J. Shearman. Raphael's Cartoons in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen and the Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel. London 1972. (Referring to Kumsch, Die Apostelgeschichte. Dresden 1914, 26). The finest Mortlake set and first woven, was given to Louis XIV as a tribute from James I and is now in the Garde Mobilier of the Louvre, Paris. Most other sets are in England: Forde Abbey, Dorset; Chatsworth, Derbyshire; Boughton House, Belvoir Castle, etc. Another set is in the collection of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York, and pieces of an Earl of Pembroke set are now part of an important mixed set of Mortlakes and Gobelins in the Palazzo Ducale, Urbino Italy.



Cartoon edits and alterations can be seen in nearly every Acts of the Apostles tapestry set, especially those of 17th c. production. The first cartoon alterations, however, occurred with the weaving of the very first Vatican tapestry in 1517. The woven version of the cartoon Christ's Charge to St. Peter from the van Aelst workshop in Brussels adds space-filling foliage wherever possible and a gold starburst pattern has been added to the pale red robe of Christ. This starburst pattern only occurs in the Vatican tapestry and in Gobelin copies made one hundred years later. (Fig. 2.) Space filling foliage occurs more frequently.

Brussels tapestry workshops were known for their love of a multiplicity of detail and at the time of the weaving of this first Raphael tapestry the weave director made the decision to decorate the robe and fill in open spaces with foliage <sup>1</sup>. The acceptable early 16th c. initiative for weavers to interpret cartoons, adding their own personal nuances, was apparently declared unacceptable at this point and succeeding production thru the 16th c. turned to precise copy of the artist's cartoons.

Seventeenth century cartoon edits were numerous. The scene Christ's Charge to St. Peter was frequently woven in two pieces to fit a customer's interior setting. A 1625 Mortlake version now in the collection of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York, separates six standing apostles from the original group of ten, with kneeling St. Peter looking up to the border panel, disconnected from Christ. The second part of the composition known in Mortlake sets as Feed My Sheep becomes a narrow panel of the lone Christ figure surrounded by sheep. An elaborate Mortlake designed border surrounds both new compositions.

A similar edit is evident in the 1621 Brussels version in the collection of the Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid. This composition isolates another group of six standing apostle figures from the original Raphael cartoon, adds a massive tree to the right side of the composition, and uniquely elaborates on original land and seascape detail, losing the compositional focus of Christ giving the keys of heaven to kneeling St. Peter. The result is Madrid's 17th c. tapestry renamed Group of Apostles. (Fig. 3.)

Another Acts of the Apostles set attributed to Jean Paul Asselbergh woven in Brussels between 1600 and 1625, now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, San Francisco has greatly compacted the composition, squeezing all of the standing apostles, some with only the tops of their heads visible, as well as the Christ figure, kneeling St. Peter and extra sheep. Background landscape foliage of a particularly unique style identifiable to this Brussels workshop has again replaced the original Raphael landscape. This altered compositional structure and very flat rendering style retains very little of Raphael's renaissance space, adding more aspects of a workshop's individual design style.(Fig. 2.)

Instances of minor cartoon edits can be seen in various versions of the Death of Ananias. Seventeenth century Mortlake versions eliminate a secondary figure at an opened window and figures walking up the stairs on the right side of the composition. This may have been done for iconographic reasons. The figures on the stairs and at the window may represent Ananias's wife Sapphira, also charged with the theft that ultimately struck her husband dead. Some Mortlake sets like the St. John the Divine set in New York add a Death of Sapphira companion tapestry to the set. This additional

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1. J. White and J. Shearman. "Raphael's Tapestries and their Cartoons (Part II)" The Art Bulletin, December 1958, 309-10.



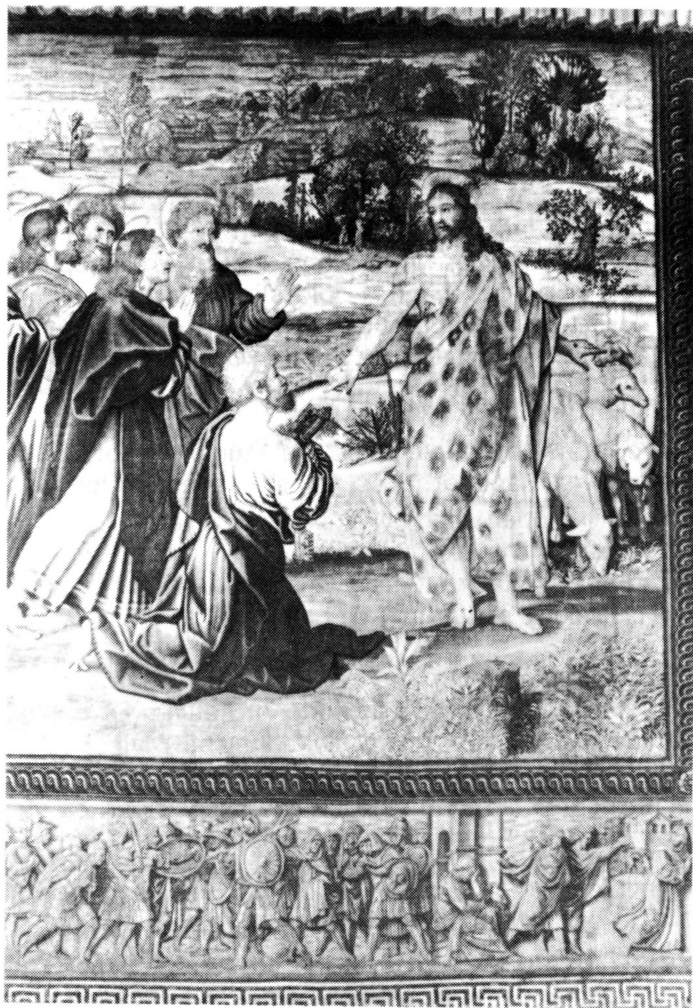


Fig. 2.

ABOVE: **Christ's Charge to St. Peter**, Raphael cartoon, c. 1515. V and A Museum, London. 11'3"x17'5".

TOP LEFT: **Christ's Charge to St. Peter**, detail, Brussels tapestry, van Aelst workshop, c. 1517.

Vatican Museum, Rome.

TOP RIGHT: **Christ's Charge to St. Peter**, Brussels tapestry, Jean-Paul Asselberghs workshop,

Fine Arts Museums, San Francisco. 12'6" x 10'7".



composition might have eliminated the need for her reference in the Death of Ananais scene.

The same scene has been further edited in other versions of the Death of Ananias. A tapestry from a partial Acts of the Apostles set now flanking the main altar in the Turin Cathedral, Turin, Italy, represents a portion of the scene which has been reduced to the group of figures giving alms to the poor, a secondary scene from the original Raphael composition. The Turin tapestry even substitutes a ceremoniously tossed garment for an important Raphael figure, effectively creating a new compositional focus. As in the Mortlake versions, the Turin tapestry eliminates the figure at the opened window, while retaining the figure walking up the stairs perhaps just for compositional balance.

Mortlake sets of Acts of the Apostles often represent some of the original cartoon compositions in edited versions, frequently cutting the cartoons to make a composition smaller and in some instances combining portions of two different cartoons to make a composition larger. The 30 foot wide tapestry in the state drawing room at Chatsworth in Derbyshire is a combination of the Healing of the lame and the Sacrifice at Lystra. In each case about one-third of the original cartoon has been skillfully eliminated. The resulting portions merge smoothly and flawlessly in design, but present two rather incongruous statements as one composition.

Two Brussels versions of the scene Sacrifice at Lystra, both in the Patrimonio Nacional collection, Madrid, Spain, illustrate other compositional edits and introduction of individual workshop style in detail areas. The 1560 tapestry from the set woven in the Brussels workshop of Jan van Tieghen is woven with complete accuracy to it's Raphael cartoon model. A two part 17th century version woven in Brussels by Jan Raes, c.1621, makes an iconographic interpretation adding a sacrificial garland and drape to the bull and even tastefully clothes the statue of Mercury in the far background. More importantly, great amounts of landscape detail in a significantly individual style have been added to both sections of the 17th century divided composition and architectural elements have been altered on the left side of that composition. Other individualized marks of the workshop are evident in the rendering of the marble pattern on the columns.

The same 1560 and 1621 Madrid sets offer more comparisons of compositional editing. While the 1560 Jan van Tieghen version of the Blinding of Elymas is true in every detail to the original Raphael cartoon, the 1621 Jan Raes version has many modifications. Architectural detail in this two part version has become more elaborate, boldly patterned marble walls and a new figure wearing a flamboyant turban (a figure not seen in any of Raphael's cartoons) have been introduced to the right side of the composition. Two twisted columns, major architectural elements in the Raphael scene Healing of the lame, have been borrowed from that composition and set on the right and left borders of this version of the Blinding of Elymas establishing a new harmonious visual link between these two tapestries. The 1620's Madrid version of the Healing of the lame (Fig. 4.) is an abbreviated version of the original cartoon with just one central twisted column visible. (See Fig. 1. for comparison).

## CONCLUSION

The edits noted in the 17th c. Madrid and San Francisco versions of the Acts of the Apostles, discussed earlier, may be demonstrating the changing nature of popular style of the period. It moves away from the need for a precise copy of Raphael's renaissance compositions towards a stronger individual workshop style. For a period of two hundred years edits and reproductions of the Acts of the Apostles provided patrons with a "certified" Raphael fitted to their own specific interior space and scale demands. Workshops accommodated the patrons requirements guided by their own philosophy, business judgement, and artistic sense.

It is evident that most edits were not undertaken arbitrarily or with disregard for the established iconography. If the market demanded copies true to Raphael's detailing, workshops would comply. Editing and adapting cartoons was done according to the skills and knowledge of the designer employed by the workshop, and a tapestry, while remarkable in technique and subtlety of its dyed color palette, was only as good as its cartoon. Cartoon reproduction proved to be a successful way for the tapestry industry to meet the demands of an ever increasing art patronage.



**Fig. 3.**  
**Group of Apostles**, Brussels tapestry,  
Jan Raes workshop, c. 1621.  
Patrimonio Nacional Collection, Madrid, Spain.



**Fig. 4.**  
**The Healing of the lame**, Brussels tapestry,  
Jan Raes and Jacob Geubels II workshop, c. 1605-29.  
Patrimonio Nacional collection, Madrid, Spain.

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