

Render

by Kathryn Allan

Raphael, tapestry cartoon for *The Miraculous Draft of Fishes*, 1515 (Fig. 13.13 in *A New History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 2017), 319 x 399 cm

and

Pieter van Aelst after Raphael, *The Miraculous Draft¹ of Fishes* (Fig. 13.14 in *A New History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 2017), 493 x 440 cm

In 1515, three years after Michelangelo had completed Rome's Sistine Chapel ceiling, the Renaissance artist Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino – Raphael – was, in a collaborative endeavour, commissioned by Pope Leo X to design a series of tapestries for the Chapel. The weavings, to be made by Pieter van Aelst from Raphael's designs and hung on the lower levels of the walls in a continuation of a pictorial narrative descending from the architectural heavens (*the ceiling*), would make visible Saints Peter and Paul. This would be the city's saintly patronage in woollen storyboard: the *Act of the Apostles* tapestries. One of the tapestries is *The Miraculous Draft of Fishes*. But how did a design rendered in paint in one country become a work of warmer tactility manufactured in another? How did flat become another artist's fibre? What was the difference between the two media and, in their difference, how was the pairing used and viewed? And, why the fish?

From the work's title, we know three things and can anticipate a fourth: that some sort of noteworthy unusualness is at play (*miraculous*); that something or some things are being pulled (*draft of*); that the scene involves aquatic animals (*of fishes*); and, by association, that it likely involves water. Browne and Evans (2010, p.66) note:

Since Early Christian times the Church had been personified as a ship, and fish were traditional symbols for Christ and Christian piety. Here [in *The Miraculous Draft of Fishes*], they may also represent souls that have been saved (taken up in Peter's nets).

¹ Some sources use the spelling *draft* where others use *draught*. For consistency with the artwork titling by the University of Oxford and the titling of the reproductions in Campbell and Cole, *draft* is used throughout the essay, except in the biblical quotation and in the Victoria & Albert reference (2004) in the bibliography.

These are *Peter's nets*. In Raphael's design for the tapestry – called a cartoon² – six figures, all arms, occupy the middle ground of the image. In their gestural, horizontal expanse, they act out LUKE *Chapter 5, verses 1-11*.³ Here, Christ, at the far left of the design in a sort of human rudder position – a painted cox – sits, left hand raised in blessing, at the head of the first boat. Peter (known in this scene as Simon Peter) kneels in front of Christ, hands seeking forgiveness. Empty nets have, on Christ's instruction, been relowered into the Lake of Gennesaret, yielding an unbelievable catch: the boats overflow with fish. In his green drapery almost iridescent, Andrew stands, his arms telling of his incredulity. Does his left hand, palm facing us, invite us into the picture? *Step into the action with us*, maybe. More arms – those of James and John in the boat behind, muscles rendered as if flesh were sculpture – haul full nets upward. Their father, Zebedee, steadies the boat on the far right of the cartoon. With Christ on the left and Zebedee on the right, we have fatherly bookends, perhaps, their paternal attentiveness echoed by the papacy in avian form in the foreground (the cranes).

Browne and Evans note, 'Christ chose the poor fishermen Simon Peter and Andrew as his first Apostles.' (2010, p.66) The image here, then, is both marker in biblical time and visual metaphor: Christ's selection of the first two of his twelve, and the catching of fish standing in for the Apostles' catching of men (the teaching of Christianity to others). As an image that would appear in the *Acts of the Apostles* tapestries to be displayed in the Sistine Chapel, this was Rome shouting about one of its own: Saint Peter, founder – with Saint Paul – of the Christian Church, rendered visible.

The tapestries continued this theme [the Chapel's higher biblical imagery], illustrating scenes from the lives of St. Peter and St. Paul who were seen as the founders of the Christian Church, and reinforcing the legitimacy of the Pope's authority and power. (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2004)

Raphael's cartoon was made in bodycolour (glue tempera)⁴ over a charcoal underdrawing on a large-scale paper surface. Multiple sheets of paper were joined to create a drawing area (the cartoon) whose size, at 319 x 399 cm, corresponded to that of the tapestry. Raphael and his assistants transferred the tapestry designs from smaller studies to the cartoons using charcoal, creating a 'monochrome guide' (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2023). With the one-colour model in

² **cartoon** from the Italian *cartone*, meaning "large sheet of paper". A full-scale drawing for a painting or tapestry, either for details (heads, hands) or for the entire composition. Cartoons for paintings allowed the transfer of the design from paper to picture surface by the process of pouncing. (Campbell and Cole, 2017, p.670)

³ And he entered into one of the ships, which was Simon's and prayed him that he would thrust out a little from the land... Now when he had left speaking, he said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught... And when they had this done, they inclosed (*sic*) a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake. (cited in Browne and Evans, 2010, p.66)

⁴ In Campbell and Cole, the colour medium is referred to as gouache (2017, p.395). On the V&A website, it is referred to as bodycolour (glue tempera).

place, the thick tempera was added, rendering the design awake. In the *Fishes* cartoon we see a largely cool palette of blues, greens and earthy tones, the once-attention grabbing pink robes of Christ now faded to a stone-like pale ochre. Although texture is described in the cartoon – particularly in the birds’ plumage, the actors’ drapery, the men’s musculature – it is in the manufacture and materials of the tapestry where the image comes texturally alive.

Pieter van Aelst was a Flemish artist commissioned to translate Raphael’s designs into tapestries. Why Pieter? He was thought to be, as Campbell and Cole note, ‘Europe’s best tapestry-maker’ (2017, p.395). In 1516 the cartoons, required as templates for the tapestries, would leave Rome for van Aelst’s Brussels workshop. So as not to destroy the original cartoons in the tapestry-making process and using a kind of Renaissance pierced, dot-to-dot technique, duplicates of the drawings were made in the weaving workshop. These replaceable copies could be cut into the necessary strips for use on the low-warp looms: flat artwork would inform and enable fibrous artwork.

Tapestry is the ‘technique of weaving discontinuous weft threads into an undyed warp thread to form a pictorial or decorative design’ (Clark et al., 2003). Tapestries are, traditionally, woven from the back, which means Raphael’s cartoons (copies of which were placed under the loom facing the weaver *and* the surface of the weaving) and the tapestries the designs became are reversals of one another: mirror images, as it were.

Side by side – cartoon next to tapestry – this is something of a spot the difference and attempts at comparison are somewhat compromised by the effect of light damage upon both the painting and the textile over time. However, we can see in the *Fishes* tapestry that Christ’s robe is strikingly bright – attention-grabbing in its red and gold – and that Andrew’s drapery glistens in a near-fluorescence unachieved in the painting. It is, in my opinion, the incorporation of this lustre – the literal weaving in of gold in techniques such as *crapautage*,⁵ of those gilt-metal-wrapped silk threads in combination with the strong woollen weft – that elevates the tapestry to a material beauty beyond the cartoon. We see it in the background landscape, the hills radiating in the weaving, and in the foreground where metallic thread turns vegetation into exquisite decoration. Whilst a less subtle medium than paint, the tapestry and its luminosity invite touch; more, its awe-inspiring shine speaks of both the skill of the weavers and of the wealth of the patron – magnificent artwork as metaphor for papal magnificence.⁶

⁵ **crapautage** ‘was a technique that consisted of running the metal thread over and under several warps (generally two in these tapestries), sometimes using a thicker thread as well’ (Browne and Evans, 2010, p.34).

⁶ To get a sense of the scale, materiality and workmanship of the tapestries, I viewed the Mortlake Tapestries – based on the Raphael cartoons and made in the 17th century at the English Mortlake Workshop – at Chatsworth House. Three *Acts of the Apostles* tapestries are on display in the State Drawing Room. I was struck by the tapestries’ wall-spanning size and artwork-as-insulator properties (wall coverage, material warmth), by the convincing imagery rendered in textile, e.g. the animated human hair, the exquisite execution of the grisaille technique turning wool into stone before my eyes (see fig.1), and by the evident skill in the workmanship.

Unlike in the cartoon, the patron is incorporated into the tapestry – the bronze-effect relief frieze along the lower edge, underscored by a Greek-key design, depicts a scene from the life of Pope Leo X rendering the donor's life visible in a kind of material subtext – and the three other sides of the weaving have a guilloche frame inspired, as Browne and Evans note, by 'the decoration of the Sistine Chapel' (2010, p.73).

Today, Raphael's cartoons – the extant seven of the original ten – can be viewed at the Raphael Court at the Victoria & Albert Museum, having been on loan from His Majesty the King since 1865.⁷ Seven of the original tapestries (subsequent series were made) including *The Miraculous Draft of Fishes* were displayed in the Sistine Chapel on 26 December 1519 on St. Stephen's Day. Now, the tapestries are hung in the Chapel on special occasions, such as in 2020 on the 500th anniversary of the death of Raphael. In 2010, as a gift of Pope Benedict XVI to mark his state visit to the United Kingdom, the cartoons and four of the original tapestries, usually divorced by geography, were brought together at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

I wonder what they said to one another in that centuries-spanning flat and fibrous union.

The word *render* has multiple meanings. In the collaboration explored here, it has been at play throughout: papal authority and faith rendered visible, Raphael's rendering of the cartoon, colour rendering an artwork awake, a design rendered in one material then rendered in another, metal rendering drapery luminous, the Chapel rendered warm (tapestry as insulation). Has the woven destination of the image, its ultimate reversal, been signalled in the cartoon all along? The reflective surface of the Lake of Gennesaret renders paint a mirror.

⁷ For more on the cartoons' journey from Europe to England, see *The mystery* and *The rediscovery* at The Victoria & Albert Museum website: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/story-of-the-raphael-cartoons#slideshow=5239394909&slide=0>

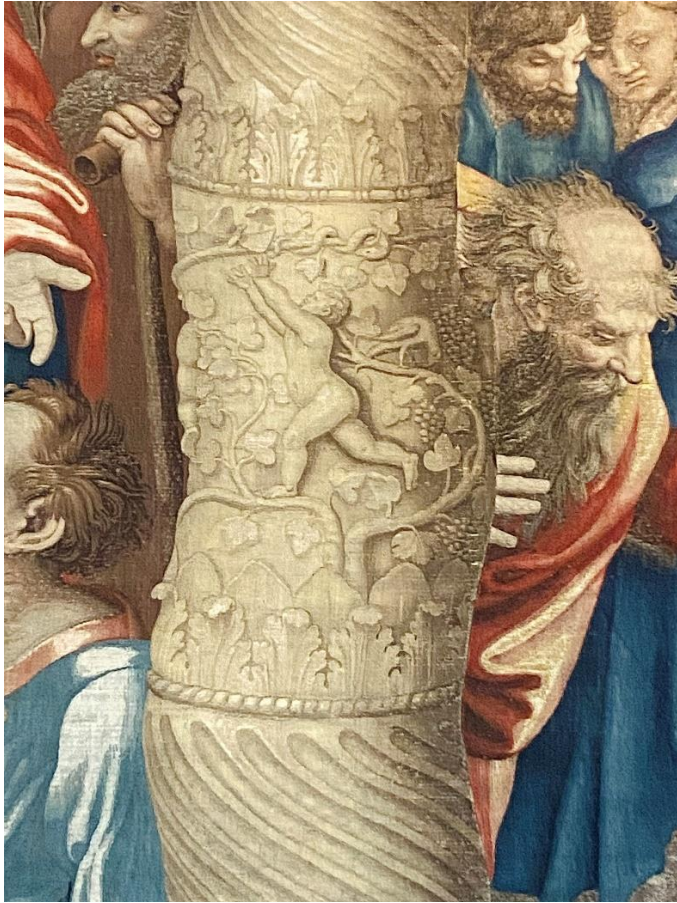


Figure 1 Detail of a Mortlake Workshop *Acts of the Apostles* tapestry showing the rendering of hair and stone in wool

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