

Conservation of the Tapestries at The Vyne, Hampshire

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The Vyne is a Tudor house lying in north Hampshire, it was originally the 16th century seat of Henry VIII's Lord Chamberlain, Lord Sandys. The house is now open to the public through the National Trust. A particular set of tapestries there are worth discussing as they have recently undergone significant conservation.



The Tapestry Room, The Vyne, Hampshire. The chinoiserie tapestries in wool and silk are English, Soho Factory, c.1720. The wooden chimneypiece was formerly in the Dining Parlour. Image courtesy of The Vyne, National Trust ©National Trust Images/Andreas von Einsiedel.

It is not clear when the tapestries were installed. They now hang mounted on panels in wall niches, softening sounds. Some of the panels were probably cut to fit the walls in the 19th century and were unlikely to have been commissioned for the room they now hang in.



Soho Vyne tapestry showing how it was cut and adjusted to size. Image courtesy of The Vyne, National Trust ©National Trust Images/Daniel Lewis.

The tapestries were woven by John Vanderbank's workshop in Soho for the Great Wardrobe, and Vanderbank provided the royal household with tapestries and the repair of their tapestries.ⁱ

In the last decade of the 17th century Vanderbank was commissioned to provide tapestries 'in the Indian manner' to hang in Queen Mary's rooms at Kensington palace.ⁱⁱ The style became fashionable and a series of the tapestries were commissioned for various private houses.

The tapestries are in a striking style. Whereas 17th century tapestries described large-scale mythical or historical themes, the later fashionable oriental design motifs in the Vyne tapestries are less formal and more accommodating to smaller, intimate rooms. They are from around 1700 and were woven using sources from illustrated travel descriptions,ⁱⁱⁱ and similar designs were used in other decorative arts such as carved wood paneling or furniture.

The orientalist designs resonate beyond the Indian to Turkish and other Eastern cultures. Ladies play the sitar, a monkey sits in a tree, and pagodas shelter groups of people in flowing garments. Characteristically the tapestries are covered in individual motifs, including vegetation which fills most of the surface. The background is very dark and borders may be integral or have been added later. Using individual elements in this way meant that the workshop could accommodate different wall sizes, adding or removing details as needed.

Whether to conserve an object is a serious decision to make – it is costly and takes considerable time, and for the National Trust the prioritisation of what needs to be conserved is an ongoing task. With water damage to the tapestries arising from the Vyne's roof renovation project in 2016, conservation became a concern.

Conserving the Vyne tapestries has been a major undertaking. Both the National Trust and a couple of commercial textile studios are working on them – ensuring that the treatment is coordinated for consistency. The first step included examining each tapestry for degrees of damage and taking small samples of yarn to be tested for colour fastness.^{iv} During the first check the conservators found two areas of sealing wax approx. 12 inches apart on the back of the tapestries; suggesting this may have been a way to measure progress of the weaving.

Previous conservation work was also reviewed – patches of fabric had been attached with contour-like stitching under weak areas, seemingly placed where local weaknesses had arisen. Various materials had been used, including printed cotton from an embroidery kit.^v The irregular contour stitching followed the outline of the tapestries' designs and were distorting the fabric; and so before the tapestries were cleaned these patches were removed. Furthermore, to keep the tapestries stable during transportation and cleaning they were supported by large-scale zigzag stitching to prevent more damage to slits and weak areas.

The tapestries were then sent to Belgium for wet cleaning.^{vi} This is undertaken in carefully controlled water-saturated chambers. Rather than being bathed in water, the tapestries are rolled out flat onto a perforated metal base - water and detergent is sprayed into the chamber to saturate the atmosphere and is sucked through the tapestries below. Although a complex process, the whole cleansing process was quick – cleaning and drying all tapestries took only 3 days.^{vii}

Once back in the UK ready for conservation work the cleaned tapestries were aligned with the linen canvas they were to be sewn onto. Conservation methods now aim to ensure the integrity of the fabric is maintained by setting the tapestries onto a strong backing material. The canvas backing used for the Vyne tapestries is an artist canvas, shrunk to remove seizing and prevent dimensional changes over time.

The main weak areas of the tapestries were: the dark wool wefts; cream silks; and damage to the previously sewn slits by the weight of the tapestries. 18th century dyers used iron to modify dark colours which together with light and dirt has rendered the dark weft yarns weak, in some places disintegrating fully. Interestingly, it is apparent that different dye-lots were used, possibly by using different plant dyes, leaving bands of various tones in background throughout the tapestries. The conservators use a mixture of commercially and acid dyed yarns for couching the historical weft or warp yarns, and use

stranded cotton in place of silk. Colours were matched to the shade they are now, on the faded front side of the pieces. Areas of total loss of both warp and weft will be filled with couched warps.

The work on the tapestries is still ongoing. It is foreseen that they will be installed back at the Vyne in 2021 where they will be put back in place and continue to stimulate visitor interest for future generations.

Acknowledgements

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i Appendix 1: The Soho Tapestry Makers

ii Edith A Standen, English Tapestries "After the Indian Manner", Metropolitan Museum Journal, Vol. 15, 1980, pp. 119-142

iii See e.g. the illustrations p. 44, 61, 92 in Arnold Montanus, Atlas Japannensis, 1670

iv Emma Telford Textile Conservator Ltd., Conservation Bulletin, Vyne Tapestries 719698.1-6 Preparation for wet cleansing

v Ibid

vi Ibid

To see how the De Wit cleans historical tapestries

vii National Trust Conservation Bulletin 2-3, THE VYNE TAPESTRIES CMS 719698.1-6 - WET CLEANING