

**Worcester Art Museum to Unveil Newly Restored *Last Judgment* Tapestry
In Special Exhibition, Highlighting the Complex Artistic Detail of the Monumental Work**

Worcester, MA—April 1, 2016—On April 23, after more than 25 years off view, the Worcester Art Museum (WAM) will present the newly restored 16th-century Flemish *Last Judgment* tapestry. The monumental work was acquired by the Museum in 1935 and is among the most significant Renaissance tapestries in America. The installation follows a nearly two-year conservation process by De Wit Royal Manufacturer of Tapestry in Belgium, known for its leading edge restoration techniques for historic textiles. The exhibition, which extends through September 18, 2016, will allow visitors to experience the intricate details of the tapestry up close.



Woven in Flanders—now the Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium—in approximately 1505, the *Last Judgment* tapestry is the last in a set of ten panels that depicted different moments in the allegorical history of Christianity. The large-scale work, which measures 12.1 x 26.2 feet, would have been displayed at royal and ecclesiastical events such as royal entries into a city, and as a luxurious furnishing in a cathedral or palace. Its complex composition features nearly 100 figures encircling Christ, in a vast array of positions and depicting the fullest range of emotion, from rapture and awe to shock and horror.

For more than fifty years, *The Last Judgment* tapestry hung in WAM's Renaissance Court, just inside the main entrance to the Museum. By 1990, having been on long-term display, the tapestry was in need of conservation, and it was de-installed and put in storage for safekeeping. In 2013, the Brussels-based King Baudouin Foundation, René and Karin Jonckheere Fund granted a generous award to WAM to have the *Last Judgment* restored to its full splendor.

“Tapestries were among the most significant and luxurious objects created in the Renaissance, and Worcester’s example is truly one of the most splendid surviving examples,” said Jon L. Seydl, Director of Curatorial Affairs and Curator of European Art at WAM. “Thanks to the magnificent restoration in Belgium, visitors will be able to appreciate the breathtaking technique and the complex composition through an installation that encourages close looking, and draws attention to specific elements of interest throughout the scene.”

The tapestry was transported to the De Wit Royal Manufacturer facility in Mechelen, Belgium, where the restoration effort was led by director Yvan Maes De Wit, a fourth-generation tapestry weaver and restorer. The textile was cleaned using an aerosol suction method patented in 1991 by De Wit, and for which they are best known and respected among museum professionals and private collectors. This technique prevents lateral bleeding of unstable dyes, reduces mechanical stress to the work, controls the risk for irregular shrinkage or deformations, and ensures the recovery of the tapestry’s original shape.

The process requires the textile be laid flat on a suction table. A cloud of aerosol mist, to which a small proportion of detergent is added, is applied from above in a constant and uninterrupted rhythm until the cleaning is complete. Concurrently, a remote controlled camera takes images of every inch of the tapestry, helping to determine the length of cleaning and ensuring that no undue stress is applied to the textile. This process not only results in a precise and delicate cleaning, but also provides excellent photographic material for future research and exploration. The cleaning is further monitored by analyzing water samples, which are taken to measure temperature, pH, and conductivity to ensure control over the procedure.

For the *Last Judgment* tapestry, once it was dry, then weak and fragile areas were strengthened and stabilized using an intricate network of stitches and linen consolidation fabrics. Old restorations, which were discolored and distracting to the viewer, were removed. New replacements were woven into the structure of the tapestry using color-fast threads dyed to match the original surrounding areas. This step restored compositional unity to the tapestry. Finally, a new linen lining was applied to the back to lend extra support and ensure longer life.

“I first saw the *Last Judgment* tapestry in 2006 when our conservation and curatorial colleagues from the Metropolitan Museum of Art tapestry department came to Worcester to examine it. The tapestry was taken from storage, brought to our largest gallery for viewing, and unrolled for the first time in many years,” said Rita Albertson, Chief Conservator at WAM. “The tapestry specialists in the room saw a tremendous opportunity to restore the *Last Judgment* tapestry to its previous greatness. As I have shepherded the tapestry through its conservation treatment, I’ve seen its exceptional beauty revealed one layer at a time. I am delighted that we can once again share the fine quality of this magnificent work with our audiences.”

With the restoration complete, the *Last Judgment* will go on view in a special exhibition that helps visitors engage with the aesthetic power of the work. The tapestry will be hung at a level that allows visitors to explore the full range of figures, the intricate technique, and the diversity

of expressions while still taking in the epic scene. Additional interpretive materials in the exhibition will include a video documenting the restoration process and digital images of specific characters. The exhibition will also be accompanied by a catalogue, which includes new scholarship by tapestry specialist Catheline Périer-D'Ieteren and traces the history of the work.

About the Worcester Art Museum

Founded in 1896, the Worcester Art Museum's encyclopedic 38,000-piece collection covers 51 centuries of art. Highlights include the Medieval Chapter House, Renaissance Court, and Worcester Hunt Mosaic, as well as the recently integrated John Woodman Higgins Armory Collection of arms and armor. The Museum is internationally known for its collection of European and American art. It was the first in America to acquire paintings by Monet and Gauguin and one of the first to collect photography. As the first U.S. museum to focus on collaborating with local schools, it has been at the forefront of engaging audiences and giving them a meaningful and personal experience.

The Worcester Art Museum, located at 55 Salisbury Street in Worcester, MA, is open Wednesday through Friday and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and every third Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Admission is \$14 for adults, \$6 for children 4-17, \$12 for seniors 65+, and \$12 for college students with ID. Members and children under four are free. Parking is free. For more information, visit worcesterart.org.

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