

'The Triumph of Fortitude'

Flemish (Brussels)

Wool and silk, 411 x 533cm



'The Triumph of Fortitude', c 1525, Flemish (Brussels)

Walker Art Gallery's 'Triumph of Fortitude' is a large tapestry, more than four metres by five metres, with a rich and complex design. The characters and symbolism contained within the tapestry would have been familiar to its 'educated' 16th century audience. They would have been able to read it almost as we read a book. Here you can find out about what they saw and understood as they admired its wealth of detail.

What does 'Fortitude' mean?

'Fortitude' is another way to describe courage or strength in the face of adversity. The Walker's tapestry, 'The Triumph of Fortitude', shows a range of Biblical and classical characters who showed outstanding bravery or heroism in dangerous and difficult situations - they are examples of fortitude.

Fortitude is one of the Seven Virtues.

- 'The Triumph of Fortitude' is one of a series of seven **tapestries** known as the 'Triumph of the Seven Virtues'.
- The seven virtues are divided into 4 Cardinal Virtues (Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance) and 3 Theological Virtues (Faith, Hope and Charity). Each tapestry in the series depicts characters who personify one of these seven virtues.
- This was a popular series. Several sets were woven for display in noble European households. A series of the 'Virtues', hung in either a domestic or a religious setting, provided moral exemplars or models. They were useful moral guides both in daily life and as instruction in how to achieve salvation in the eyes of the Christian church.

What does the scroll at the top of the tapestry tell us about fortitude?



The scroll at the top of the tapestry is written in Latin. It says:

'Obiicit adversis interrita corda periculis. Virtus, eque iuvat morte recepta salus.'

This has been translated as:

'Valour matches intrepid hearts against adverse perils. Likewise, salvation accepted from death pleases.'

This means that when faced with danger, virtuous people show courage or fortitude. If they should die in their efforts, they will be rewarded with eternal life.

Identified Characters

Please note that we have used the common name to identify each character. Where this differs from the name given on the tapestry, the latter is given in brackets).



Alexander

The name 'Alexander' on the tapestry may refer to Alexandria, the great conquering city in Egypt, built 332 BC by Alexander the Great.

Or it may refer to Alexander the Great, chief commander of the Grecian states in the 4th century BC. This could be Alexander himself who can be seen climbing the walls of a besieged tower in the top right-hand corner.



Cocles

Publius Horatius Cocles was a celebrated Roman who lived in the 3rd century BC . He can be seen about halfway up the far left of the tapestry.

Cocles is swimming in the **River Tiber**, having just jumped from the bridge he alone was defending against the whole of the Etrurian army. 'Cocles' is Latin for 'one-eyed man'. Publius Horatius Cocles got this nickname as he had the use of only one eye.



Holofernes and Judith

Judith was a rich and beautiful widow who lived in the city of Bethulia. Her story is found in the Old Testament of the Bible.

When the Assyrian army laid siege to Bethulia, Judith devised a scheme to save the city. She pretended to have deserted her people and was accepted by the enemy army. Having caught the attention of the general Holofernes, she was invited to a banquet, after which he intended to seduce her. However, Holofernes fell into a drunken sleep. Judith took her opportunity to kill him and the tapestry depicts the moment when she struck off his head with two blows, using Holofernes' own sword. The news of Holofernes' death caused the Assyrians to panic and they fled. (The Old Testament, Judith 13)

You can see Judith cutting of Holofernes' head near the top left of the tapestry.



Chloelia

Chloelia was the fearless and headstrong daughter of an important Roman family who lived in the 3rd century BC .

As part of a hostage deal with Porsenna, the King of Etruria, the Romans agreed to give him ten children from their most important families. In the tapestry, to the far left, we are shown the moment when one of these children, Chloelia, escaped from Porsenna's camp by crossing the

River Tiber on horseback, only to be returned to Porsenna by the Romans. In admiration of her courage, however, Porsenna gave Chloelia a horse and set her free.



Mutius Scevola

Mutius Scevola was a young Roman, determined to save his city from Porsenna, King of Etruria in the 3rd century BC . You can see him standing at the front of the taperstry in the bottom left-hand corner.

Mutius sneaked into Porsenna's camp disguised as a Tuscan and entered the king's tent, but mistakenly attacked a secretary, rather than Porsenna himself. Mutius was seized and brought before the king. As proof of his fortitude, Mutius placed his hand on burning coals and informed the king that he was one of 300 young Romans who had conspired against his life, entered the camp in disguise and were determined to destroy him or die in the attempt. Porsenna was alarmed by this confession, and consequently made peace with the Romans and left their city.

Mutius Scevola obtained the name 'Mutius' (meaning 'mutilated' or 'maimed') having lost the use of his right hand as a result of the burns he sustained in this incident.



Eleazer

Eleazer is an heroic character in Jewish history. His story appears in the 'Apocrypha', a collection of writings produced by Jews during the centuries following the close of the Old Testament and prior to the beginning of the New.

In 163 BC , the enemy king Lysias, with 120,000 men and 32 war elephants, met with the Israelite leader Judas and his army close to Jerusalem. Although Judas' men killed 600 enemy soldiers, they were forced to retreat into the city. During this battle, Judas' younger brother, Eleazer, died when he single-handedly attacked a large elephant that he believed to be carrying the enemy king. (1 Macabees 6:46).

You can see him stabbing the elephant at the top of the tapestry, slightly left of centre.



Cinope

Cinope (or Sinope) was Queen of the Amazons around 1300 BC . She was renowned for courageously leading her warriors in battle and for remaining a virgin.

Here she is shown riding one of the lions near the centre of the tapestry.



Lions

Lions symbolise **fortitude** and also the Resurrection of Christ. In this piece they are shown pulling the chariot of Fortitude herself.



Sicinius Dentatus (Dentatus)

Sicinius Dentatus was a Roman **tribune** and warrior who died in about 405 BC and is described by Pliny, the famous classical Roman writer, as an example of courage.

Sicinius Dentatus was celebrated for his courage in battle during a career in the Roman army lasting around 40 years. He could show the scars of 45 wounds on his chest, all received in battle. However, he was hated by Appius Claudius, a Roman senator, who arranged for 100 men to attack him. Sicinius Dentatus resisted, killing 15 men and wounding 30, but finally died in a barrage of darts and stones thrown at him from a distance. He has sometimes been called 'The Roman Achilles'. Here you can see him riding a lion alongside Cinope.



Marcus Cassius Sceva (Sceva)

Sceva was a **centurion** in **Julius Caesar's** army during the 1st century BC .

Here we see Sceva's death at the Battle of Dyrrhachium. He fought off four legions of the enemy's army for several hours despite being severely wounded by arrows and javelins. He is shown pierced by these right at the front of the tapestry, just left of the centre.



Eagle

An ancient symbol of power and victory, the eagle is also the medieval symbol of Christ's ascension. The double-headed eagle is one of the symbols of the **Habsburg** family, linking this tapestry to its original owners.



Fortitude (Fortitudo)

The personification of fortitude.

Fortitude wears a helmet and armour, carries Samson's Pillar in her right hand and strangles a dragon with her left. She rides in a chariot. The chariot was a traditional feature of Renaissance art, emphasising victory.

Samson's Pillar relates to the story of Samson in the Old Testament. After many daring exploits, Samson was captured by the **Philistines**, who blinded and humiliated him. One day he was taken to a house full of Philistines, where he grasped the pillars supporting the roof and prayed for vengeance. The house collapsed, killing him and many of his enemies. (Judges 13-16)

The dragon in Christian culture symbolises Satan. Here, its strangulation at the hands of Fortitude represents the conquest of evil.



Penthesilea (Penthesieea)

Penthesilea was the Queen of the Amazons and the daughter of Mars.

Penthesilea fought in the Trojan War against Achilles, who ultimately killed her. Afterwards, when he had stripped her of her arms, the hero was so impressed by her beauty that he wept.

You can see her in the middle of the tapestry, just below the eagle.



Queen Thomyris (Thamaris)

Thomyris was Queen of the Massagetae. You can see her standing at the front in the middle of the tapestry, holding a sword.

After her husband's death Thomyris followed her son in an unsuccessful march against Cyrus, King of Persia, who threatened to attack her lands. Thomyris destroyed his army and killed him on the spot. She ordered Cyrus' head to be cut off and thrown into a goatskin full of human blood, whilst uttering the words:

'Satia te sanguine quem sitisti'

('That is enough blood to quench your thirst').

In the tapestry we see Thomyris holding the head of Cyrus.



David

David was the shepherd boy who became King of Israel, ruling in around 1000 BC . David is believed to be the author of the Psalms in the Bible and to have been a direct ancestor of Jesus.

In the tapestry, we see David being offered water from the well of Bethlehem, a scene which illustrates the fortitude of both David and his servants. During a war, David had voiced a desire to drink from a well in Bethlehem, within the enemy camp. Three of his servants forced their way into the camp, drew the water and brought it to David. Yet despite his thirst, David refused to drink, saying

"Is it not the blood of men going there at the risk of their souls?"

(2 Samuel 23:13-17)



Hercules or Samson

This could be Hercules, the demi-god of Greek myth or Samson, the Old Testament hero.

Eurystheus, King of Argos and Mycenae, was jealous of the fame of Hercules. In an attempt to destroy him, Eurystheus ordered Hercules to perform a series of dangerous tasks, usually known as 'The Twelve Labours of Hercules'. The first of these was to kill the Lion of Nemea, which had ravaged the country around Mycenae. Hercules choked the lion to death, carried the dead animal to Mycenae and from then on clothed himself in its skin as a trophy.

Samson was renowned for his strength, having single-handedly killed 1000 Philistines and uprooted the gates of the city of Gaza. This scene may show him slaying a lion with his bare hands. (Judges XIV, 5-9) The medieval Church interpreted this action as the struggle of Christ against the devil.



Nehemiah (Neemias)

Nehemiah was a trusted Jewish official at the Persian court in the 5th century BC .

When Nehemiah heard that Jerusalem still lay in ruins almost a century after the Jews had returned from exile, he persuaded the Persian king to allow him to go to Jerusalem and undertake the rebuilding there himself.

Beneath the word 'Neemias', towards the top right-hand corner, the tapestry shows four of his warriors keeping watch from the towers of Jerusalem (Hierusalem). A man bent beneath a heavy load climbs a ladder towards them. Nehemiah's efforts had caused such hostility that he had to arm his workers to ward off a possible attack, but he and his men completed the wall and gates of the city after 52 days of gruelling labour. (Nehemiah or 2 Ezra 1-4)



Phinehas (Phnees)

Phinehas is a character found in the Old Testament of the Bible.

When Phinehas found that a woman had been brought to his brothers in their camp for adulterous purposes, he went after the woman, and the man who had procured her, and stabbed them both to death. (Numbers 25:7) Here we see Phinehas, behind David, with a halberd (a large type of axe), shield and helmet.



Jael and Sisera (Jahel and Sisaram)

Sisera was a cruel Canaanite leader who ruled the Israelites for twenty years.

Following a successful surprise attack by the Israelites in which 900 of his charioteers were defeated, Sisera escaped and sought refuge in the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. She gave the terrified Canaanite food and drink, but when he fell asleep, she drove a tent peg into his brain. (Judges 4:12-24). She can be seen, hammer raised ready to strike, in the bottom right corner.



Joshua (Josue)

In the Old Testament, Joshua was appointed by God to be Moses' successor as leader of the Israelites.

Joshua accompanied Moses on the long and difficult journey to Canaan, the Promised Land, and remained faithful to God throughout many temptations and difficulties.

The tapestry shows Joshua entering the Promised Land with the Israelites (Joshua 1, Numbers 14:30 and 32:12). He can be seen on horseback towards the top right corner.

Where did the tapestry come from ?

The 'Triumph of Fortitude' has had a long and mysterious history. From its origins in 16th century Europe to its present home in the Walker Art Gallery, the **tapestry** has passed through many hands and hung in many locations.

The 16th century was the 'Golden Age' of **Flemish** tapestry production, when many fine works were created by highly skilled weavers in numerous workshops across what is now Belgium and the Netherlands.

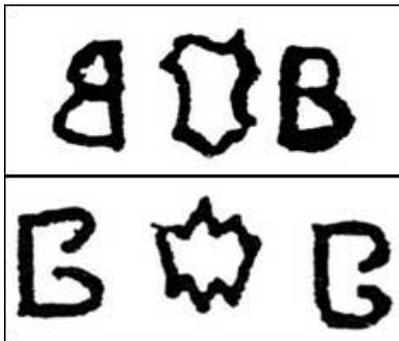


Illustration of two Brussels marks

We cannot say which particular workshop produced 'The Triumph of Fortitude', as it contains no **Weaver's Marks**. However, it was probably woven in **Brussels**, as others from the same series bear the **Brussels mark**. This helps us date the tapestry to before 1528, as after then it became compulsory to include the Brussels mark on new tapestries woven in the city.

We do not know who originally owned 'The Triumph of Fortitude', but as part of an expensive set of seven tapestries called 'The Triumph of the Virtues', it would certainly have belonged to a wealthy person. Empress Isabella, wife of the Habsburg emperor Charles V of Spain is known to have owned a set of the 'Virtues'. When she died in 1539 they were passed down through the Spanish royal family, before being lost to history. Perhaps 'The Triumph of Fortitude' was part of that very set?

Having purchased the tapestry privately from a Spanish collector in 1933, 'The Triumph of Fortitude' hung in the residence of the British Ambassador to Cairo, Sir Ronald Storrs. It was later sold by Sir Ronald to Martins Bank Limited, who presented the tapestry as an anonymous donation to the Walker Art Gallery in 1953.

Given the tapestry's great age, care has been taken to ensure that it is maintained and cared for as well as possible. In 1961, it was surface cleaned, repaired and mothproofed by conservators at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. More extensive cleaning and repairs were carried out between 1983 and 1985 at the Hampton Court Conservation Centre. Today its condition is maintained through control of the gallery's temperature and **humidity** and by regular checks on the fabric.



Head of Cyrus - Before Cleaning



Head of Cyrus - After Cleaning

What were tapestries used for?



'The Triumph of Fortitude', c 1525, Flemish (Brussels)

Tapestries were displayed in the palaces, cathedrals and grand residences of Medieval and Renaissance Europe. People had tapestries for many different reasons:

- they were **commissioned** as grand wall hangings for the cathedrals, palaces and the houses of wealthy people.
- they were regarded as works of art, providing inspiration and enjoyment for their owners.
- their designs often told a story. Some were commissioned to show scenes of the owner's power, benevolence or courage in battle. Others, like Walker Art Gallery's 'Triumph of the Virtues', had a moral or religious message. Indeed, they were often the focus of discussions in high-society, providing hours of entertainment!
- they could be extremely large and expensive to produce. In the 16th century, a set of seven tapestries could cost as much as an entire year's income for a wealthy duke. They were often commissioned and purchased to show the importance and wealth of the owner. Henry VIII, one of England's most famous monarchs, owned an extensive collection of rich continental tapestries, proving his high status. Tapestries often feature in the background of portraits of noblemen and women as a sign of their wealth.
- when travelling between residences, visiting friends or meeting allies, wealthy people often carried tapestries with them to use as portable decorations. These allowed the owner to feel at home wherever he or she went.
- for centuries, tapestries were only displayed on special occasions, but by the late 17th century they had become permanent decorative fixtures on the walls of grand buildings. Here they also fulfilled practical functions, such as making rooms warmer by absorbing damp and stopping drafts.

How were Tapestries Made ?



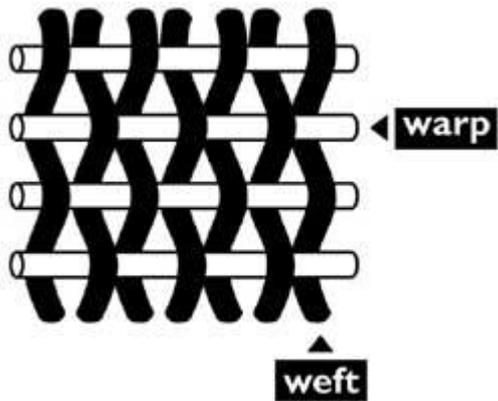
'The Triumph of Fortitude', c 1525, Flemish (Brussels)

The making of a **tapestry** involves numerous stages from design to completion. Some of the main steps are explained here, but you can find more detailed information from the books in the [find out more section](#).

- Tapestry manufacture has varied throughout the ages. Common practice during the **Renaissance** period involved the use of a pre-designed image, known as a **cartoon**. This would be provided by an independent artist who did not necessarily reside or work near the workshop where the tapestry would later be produced. It is not known who designed the 'Triumph of Fortitude'. However, one contemporary artist who worked on tapestry cartoons was the famous Raphael, whose designs for the 'Apostles' series were particularly influential.
- Once in the workshop, the cartoon would be placed underneath a weaving **loom** and function as a blueprint for the weaver to work from directly.
- From this initial stage, the tapestry was created by the passing of coloured lengths of silk, wool or metallic threads known as **wefts**, through stronger, load-bearing lengths of wool or linen called **warps** (see diagram below). During the weaving process, the wefts are parallel to the weaver. However, when they are hung, the tapestry is turned so that the warp direction runs horizontally.
- The design was built up by the continuous passing of the weft back and forth through the warps until a thick band of colour was formed. As different areas of colour were built up, patterns or figurative images emerged.
- As the tapestries were hand made, they naturally took a long time to produce. The tapestry at Walker Art Gallery is 411 cm x 533 cm, but it is estimated that one only slightly bigger would required the equivalent of thirty weavers to work for between eight and sixteen months!
- To consolidate the image the weaver pressed down the threads with a hand-held beater. This insured that the warps were completely covered by the weft so that the tapestry image looked complete.



Detail of the head of Cyrus, with wefts clearly visible.



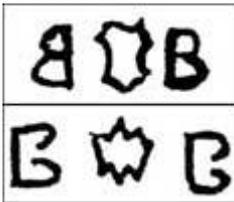
The warp is shown in white, the weft in black.

Glossary

Tapestries were displayed in the palaces, cathedrals and grand residences of Medieval and Renaissance Europe. People had tapestries for many different reasons:

- **Brussels**
A city in Belgium, referred to as the Low Countries or Flanders in the 16th century. During this time, Brussels was renowned for the high quality and large number of tapestries produced there.

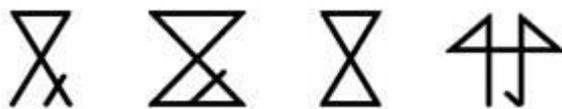
- **Brussels Mark**



The double 'B' symbol woven into tapestries made in Brussels workshops. It was compulsory to include this symbol on all tapestries woven in Brussels after 1528.

- **Cartoon**
The full scale, colour image of the design that a tapestry is based on, usually created by 'freelance' artists.
- **Centurion**
A commander in the Roman army who was in charge of one hundred men.
- **Commission**
An order or command for something, particularly a work of art, to be produced specially
- **Flemish**
The language, people and products of Flanders, a region of Northern Europe divided between present day France, Belgium and the Netherlands.
- **Fortitude**
Courage or strength in the face of adversity.
- **Habsburg**
The House of Habsburg was a powerful and prominent family of European rulers, patrons and collectors. The Austrian members of the family ruled Austria from 1278 until 1918, and were Holy Roman Emperors from 1452 until 1806. The Spanish branch which controlled Flanders was established in 1516 and continued to occupy the Spanish throne for the next 184 years.
- **Humidity**
This is the amount of moisture present in the air. In a gallery or museum, humidity has to be monitored to ensure that conditions do not become too damp or too dry, either of which could cause damage to the works on display.

- Julius Caesar
The first Roman emperor.
- Loom
The wooden frame on which a tapestry is woven.
- Medieval
The period of European history lasting from c 1100 until 1453 AD .
- Philistines
A non-Jewish people who lived in ancient Palestine and came into conflict with the Israelites.
- Renaissance
A revival of art and literature in 14th-16th century Europe, influenced by classical Roman and Greek culture.
- River Tiber
The Italian river that runs through the heart of Rome.
- Tapestry
A piece of thick textile fabric with pictures or designs formed by the weaving of coloured weft threads through thicker warp threads.
- Tribune
An official in ancient Rome, elected by the ordinary people to protect their interests.
- Warp
Load bearing threads, usually of wool or linen, which form the structure of a tapestry.
- Weaver's Mark



This is a symbol sewn into a tapestry by a weaver. It may be the weaver's personal sign, or perhaps that of a merchant involved in the commission and sale of a tapestry. Although we cannot always be sure of the exact meaning, weaver's marks help us identify which tapestries originated in the same workshop. They are sometimes known as atelier marks - atelier is French for 'workshop'.

- Weft
The colourful, decorative wool, silk or metallic threads that form the patterns of the tapestry.
- Virtue
A quality considered morally good or desirable.

Resources

Books

Campbell, T.P. (2002) 'Tapestry in the Renaissance'. New York.

Web Links

See other tapestries like Walker Art Gallery's 'Triumph of Fortitude' at these museums:

Biltmore House, Asheville, South Carolina, USA.

www.biltmore.com. Examples of the 'Triumph of Charity' and of 'Prudence' are located at Biltmore House.

Cluny Museum, Paris, France www.musee-moyenage.fr. One example of the 'Triumph of Hope' is held in the Cluny Museum.

Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA.

www.carnegiemuseums.org Another 'Triumph of Hope' is held in the Carnegie Institute.

de Young Museum, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco, USA. www.thinker.org/deyoung. Examples of the 'Triumph of Prudence', 'Justice' and 'Fortitude' are held at the de Young Museum. You can see digital images of 'Justice' and 'Fortitude' by entering their names into the search facility of this website.

Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, Scotland. www.nms.ac.uk/royal. One example of the 'Triumph of Prudence' is held at the Royal Scottish Museum and is mentioned on their website.

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. www.khm.at

An Example of the 'Triumph of Prudence' is held here.

This feature was researched and written during a work placement at Walker Art Gallery by Susan Berry and Claire Wintle, two students on the Art Gallery & Museum Studies MA course at the University of Manchester.