



Background

THE STIRLING TAPESTRIES PROJECT

An exciting project to recreate one of the world's finest surviving set of Medieval tapestries has reached its halfway stage.

Once complete *The Hunt of the Unicorn* series will adorn the walls of the Queen's Inner Hall – where Mary de Guise held court in her palace at Stirling Castle.

This separately funded £2 million initiative is closely tied to the wider plans to return the royal lodgings in the palace to their Renaissance magnificence.

A total of seven tapestries, each measuring 3.3m by up to 3.8m, are being hand-woven at the castle itself and at the West Dean Tapestry Studio in West Sussex.

They tell a tale of the hunt and slaying of a unicorn to obtain its horn, which has magical powers of purification, after which the creature returns to life.

Inventories from 1539 show that the Scottish royal collection included a set depicting '*the historie of the unicorn*' which may have been very similar.

The new versions are based on tapestries of a similar period from the Low Countries and which are now on display in the Cloisters Museum, at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Each new tapestry takes between two and a half to four and a half years to make depending on its width and the final one will be complete in 2013.

The first three are already on display in the Chapel Royal and the chance to see the weavers at work is an important attraction for visitors.

The tapestries project is a collaboration between Historic Scotland and a range of sponsors, principally the Quinque Foundation and [the Guild of Weavers](#). The MET has been key to the project by giving HS permission to copy the originals and allowing the weavers unique access to study them.

FAQs

What are the originals the new series is being copied from? The set in New York date from 1495-1505 and are widely accepted as some of the finest in the world. Their early history is unknown. But in 1680 they appear in the inventory of Francois VI de la Rochefoucauld, a wealthy French duke. They were donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1937 by John D Rockefeller Jr.

Which tapestries have been made so far? *The Unicorn in Captivity* was unveiled in 2003 and *The Start of the Hunt* followed in 2004. *The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle* was unveiled in 2007. *The Unicorn is Found* will be unveiled in July 2008.

When did the project start and how long will it last? The first tapestry was begun in 2001 and all seven are expected to be complete by 2013.

What are they made from? They are woven from wool, silk, silver and gilt wefts.

What is the cost? The final cost will be around £2 million. The project has received a range of donations, including \$2.125m (US) from the Quinque Foundation, USA.

What do they show? The tapestries show the hunt, killing and return to life of a unicorn in order to obtain its horn, which was believed to have magical powers of purification. It can be read as a tale of courtly love in which the lady pursues and eventually captures her bridegroom, or as a metaphor for the suffering and resurrection of Christ.

Is the series complete? There is academic argument about whether *The Start of the Hunt* and *The Unicorn in Captivity* are from a different series with a similar theme as they have fewer characters and are stylistically simpler.

Do the new ones look old? The originals have faded over the last 500 years. The new versions are being created to look as they did when new, so they will be much brighter. A great deal of research went into making sure the colours are authentic.

What were tapestries used for? Tapestry was an integral part of medieval and renaissance interior decoration in the large state-rooms and great halls of Scottish Royal residences. It provided decoration and a lavish display of wealth and also kept out the cold and damp. They could also be rolled up and transported in the royal baggage train, fitting in perfectly with the semi-nomadic lifestyle of the court.

Why were they valued? Tapestries were prized not only for their beauty, but also for the amount of time they took to weave and their consequent great cost.

Did Scottish royals have lots of them? James V and his father, James IV, were great collectors. They both married women who brought their own tapestry sets to the royal collection. By 1536, James V was purchasing his own, possibly on his trip to France before his first (and short-lived) marriage to Madeline. The treasurers' accounts show that in 1538 further tapestries were delivered from Flanders.

Notes for editors

- West Dean Tapestry Studio, West Dean College, West Sussex, is part of the Edward James Foundation, an educational charitable trust. Further information can be found by visiting www.westdean.org.uk or contacting the communications department of the Edward James Foundation on 01243 818208 or emailing communications@westdean.org.uk.
- The Quinque Foundation has a long association with Scotland. It is the family foundation of Mrs Helen Buchanan of Exeter, Rhode Island, USA, who was awarded an OBE in 2006 for services to the community. Quinque has partnered Historic Scotland to bring experts together to contribute to the body of knowledge of techniques, standards, policies and materials vital to the preservation industry. The Quinque Fellows Programme has provided opportunities for numerous Scots to work in the USA. Americans have also been hosted in the UK. Mrs Buchanan and the foundation have also supported properties in the care of the National Trust for Scotland such as Robert Smal's Printing Works in Innerleithen.
- For more details about the Metropolitan Museum of Art see <http://www.metmuseum.org/>.
- The Historic Scotland Foundation is a charity established specifically to provide enabling funding for projects that Historic Scotland would not be able to fund from its own resources.

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