

THE HUNT OF THE UNICORN

THE TAPESTRIES PROJECT – RECREATING MEDIEVAL MASTERPIECES



STIRLING
CASTLE

Linked to the refurbishment of the palace is an exciting, and separately funded, £2 million project to recreate one of the world's finest surviving sets of Medieval tapestries. *The Hunt of the Unicorn* series will adorn the Queen's Inner Hall – where Mary de Guise held court in her palace at Stirling Castle. Seven tapestries, measuring up to 3.3m by up to 3.8m, are being hand-woven at the castle and at the West Dean Tapestry Studio in West Sussex. They tell 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 unicorne*' which may have been very similar. The new versions are based on tapestries of around the right 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 four are now on display in the Chapel Royal and seeing the weavers at work is an important visitor attraction. 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 vital to the project by giving permission to copy the originals and allowing the weavers access to study them.

FAQs

What is the new series being copied from? The set in New York date from 1495-1505 and are 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 French duke. They were donated to the Met in 1937 by John D Rockefeller Jr.

Which tapestries have been woven so far? *The Unicorn in Captivity* was unveiled in 2003 and *The Start of the Hunt* in 2004. *The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle* was completed in 2007 and *The Unicorn is Found* 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 hunt, killing and return to life of a unicorn to obtain its horn. It can be read as a tale of courtly love where the lady pursues and finally captures her bridegroom, or as a metaphor for Christ's suffering and resurrection.

Is the series complete? Some academics believe *The Start of the Hunt* and *The Unicorn in Captivity* are from a different series as they are simpler in style, with fewer characters.

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 for? Tapestry was integral to the Medieval and Renaissance decoration of state rooms and great halls of Scottish royal residences. It provided decoration, told stories and displayed wealth, while keeping out the cold and damp.

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 an inventory of 1539 shows there were over 100 pieces in the royal collection. 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 treasurer's accounts show that in 1538 further tapestries were delivered from Flanders.

Notes

- 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 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 also 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. It also ran a fellowship programme which allowed Scots to work in the US and Americans to be hosted in the UK.
- 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.