

*About the Agreement of 1476 between the Brussels  
Painters and Tapestry Weavers Concerning Cartoon  
Painting*

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In 1876, Alphonse Wauters, the archivist from the city of Brussels, published the first specific study devoted to the history of Brussels tapestries .[1] It was the outcome of his life long research in the city archives, and several very interesting documents were published in his book. Among them, he revealed an agreement made on June 6, 1476, between the painters and the tapestry weavers about the painting of cartoons.[2] Summarized in short, it tell us about a complaint of the painters against the weavers, because these last ones used some models ("patronen") on paper , made by people who did not belong to the painters guild. In the agreement, the weavers got permission to make such cartoons, but with several limitations. This document has often been cited in tapestry literature as an indirect proof of the pictorial qualities of Brussels tapestries from that period on.

A careful philological reading will try to explain the document in its right context.

The painters accused the weavers that they had "several workmen, from abroad and others, who made for some weavers some models on paper, with charcoal and chalk, on which the weavers worked". [3] and this was opposed to their guild regulations [4]. This contains several points of interest. The people who made these "models" came partly from abroad, so maybe painters or apprentices from an other town ? Their works were not just small scale drawings but life size cartoons ("*on which the weavers worked*"), and they are **on paper**, and paint or designed with charcoal and chalk. As far as I know, is this the earliest reference of the use of paper cartoons in the Southern Netherlands. The common material for tapestry life size models during the 15th century was *linen* or *canvas*, of which we had numerous references from the late fourteenth century on .[5]Philip the Bold pays to Colart Honoré of Arras in 1390

for two hundred ell coarse linen for cartoons with pastoral scenes. In 1441, Jacques Daret has to paint such cartoons with glue paint for the abbey of Saint Vaast in Arras. For cartoons of tapestries to be made for the Medici, Tommaso Portinari orders in Bruges 887 ells of linen in March 1459. [6] And still in 1503-1506, the canons of Salins got a bill of 39 pounds for 480 ells of canvas, for the cartoons destined to the Life of Saint Anathole, to be woven in Bruges at the manufactory run by the widow of Jean Le Sauvage, alias De Wilde.[7]

In 1476, the Brussels painters requested that the weaver should be fined, if they cannot justify the foreign workers. But both sides came to an agreement, under supervision of the city council. The weavers were allowed to make parts of cartoons for their own used, but with two restrictions.

1. Firstly, they may only reproduce *subjects related to nature* : “*toffen, boomen, loef ende gers, vogelen ende beesten dienede tot hueren verdueren*. “in translation: “bunches of flowers/ bushes, trees, foliage and grass, birds and animals to be used for their greenworks” [8]

The first term “toffen“ is a bit ambiguous. It is apparently deduced from the French: “*des touffes*”, which could refer either to bunches of flowers, or to bushes, shrubs. Beautiful bunches of little flowers ornate indeed the foreground so many exquisite Brussels tapestries of this period, up to circa 1520, e.g. *the Fulfilling of the Prophecies at the Nativity of Christ* (Madrid, Patrimonio Nacional, series 2/I, before 1509) or the *Communion of Herkinbald* (Brussels, Cinquantenaire, inv. 86 ; 1513) and so many others .[9]

These elements may be applied to cartoons for greenwork: “*dienede tot hueren verdueren*”. This is an early appearance of the term “**verduere**” in Flemish. The earliest was found in a contract for weaving tapestries in Enghien, dated 22 september 1457[10] In a contract of 6 October 1490, reference is made to such a tapestry woven with gold and silver . [11] It is borrowed from the French ‘verdure’, that was commonly used in the 15th century.

But the question remains to what extent this license to design greenwork and animals could be used by the weavers ? Was it limited to elements on the front of figurative tapestries, like the examples cited above ? or could it also be valued for large compositions, such as “millefleurs” backgrounds, like e.g. the choir tapestries with Saints, dated 1520, in the cathedral of Xanten (Germany) (**Fig. 1**) ? These weavings, and several others of that type, witness a profound knowledge of botanics and a high skill of design.



(Fig.1) © Guy Delmarcel

In opposition to this restriction, it meant that the reproduction of human characters, great animals, architecture and any other figurative element remained the privilege of the painters, registered in the corporation.

At the start of the document, the weavers are accused to have employed foreign workers “*vreemde werckgesellen*” : is this related to people foreign from the tapestry guild ? and thus specialized designers ?

2. The other restriction applies to the **material** used for these designs. The weavers are allowed to paint them only with charcoal, chalk or with ink (the pen) and only for themselves : “*dat sy dat insgelycx selen moegen doen met colen, cryte oft metter penne ende elc voir hen selven*” . And this means (in “*argumentum silentii*”) that the proper painters’ materials: body painting, oil painting or tempera, i.e. fluid materials were not allowed. The painters’ guild was apparently quite strict about the privilege of fluid material. An other example can be found in a trial of 1494-1495 between the painter’s guild of Antwerp and a local printer of images and books, Adriaan van Liesvelt. He was suspected to use not just ink, but a mixture of ink, oil and varnish. In the same period, other printers are prohibited the use of brush and paint (“*pincheel ofte verwe*”) for their works. [12]

The 1476 agreement can be summarized as follows. The tapestry weavers were allowed to draw complements on paper for their cartoons related to greenwork. They may represent floral and animal items. These items should be reproduced with charcoal, colored chalks and ink. In other words: the painting of figurative elements in body or oil paint on cartoons, remained the privilege of the painters’ guild. It has been deduced from this agreement that it enhanced the pictorial quality of the Brussels tapestry, because of the painters’ privilege.[13] For me this seems a bit overrated : the 1476 agreement refers from its inception to paper cartoons drawn with charcoal and chalk. The painters had not to expect this agreement for developing their talents of cartoon painting.

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During the following generations, related problems of painting for tapestry popped up again, but this time they were related not to the cartoons but to the woven tapestries themselves. It is the famous debate of **retouching** woven tapestries with painted material, a debate that will last until the seventeenth century.[14]

It started around 1525 with complaints by foreign merchants that parts of tapestries were not woven, but painted. On 24 April, the Brussels city council decided that no part of faces, noses, eyes, ears may be retouched by liquid substances. Further on, a special group of painters, the “*afzetters*” (Dutch), “*retoucheur*” or “*lustreur*” (French) were allowed to upgrade some parts only with dry colours, such as colored chalks.

These abuses will lead firstly to the introduction of the woven city and producer's marks in Brussels in 1528, and later on to specific points in the imperial Edict of 1544 concerning the production of tapestries all over the weaving centers of the Netherlands. No less than nine articles describe the limits and use of the retouching . Article 51 limits the use of wet substances to ink and vegetal solutions ('*follegram soppe*'), and they may apply only to mark the limits, the contours of fruit, greenwork , parts of bodies (*om te hulpen de proffylinge oft scheydinge vande fruyten, verdueren, leden oft dyergeliicke d'een vanden andere*); article 52 stipulates that white chalk, red and black "*pinoir*" and only in dry form may be used for enhancing faces and naked parts of the body [15]

In a request of the merchant Jean Hertsteene, 27 March 1541, the retouching is already described as being related to "*nuées, terroirs, arbres , fruictz, massonaiges et semblables*" and this apparently with vegetal extracts ('*follegrain, blaubomme et semblables*')[16]

In a later trial of the producers Jean Raes and Jacques Geubels against the "retoucheur" Guillaume Reymbouts (1621-1626), it is repeated that these "afzetters" may use no other wet substances ("*natte soppen*") than follegrain or ink, repeating here the text of article 51 of the edict of 1544 '[17]

Can we find nowadays still traces of these retouches on ancient tapestry ? Most of them have disappeared by fading, but also by washing tapestries in modern conservation institutes. Attention should be given to this phenomenon. When the tapestry of the *Deploation of Christ* at the Royal Museums of Art & History in Brussels (inv. 858) was submitted to conservation at the Royal Institute for Artistic Patrimonium in Brussels, in 1982, a preliminary inquiry with microscope revealed the presence of some dry substance in the faces of some protagonists (**Fig .2**) . Such a "facelift" might be related to the intervention of the "afzetters" around 1520.



Fig. 2 © Guy Delmarcel

## References

1. Alphonse Wauters, *Les tapisseries bruxelloises. Essai historique sur les tapisseries et les tapissiers de haute et de basse – lice de Bruxelles*, Brussels, Julien Baertsoen, 1878, 477 pages. An anastatic reprint was made by the Editions Culture et Civilisations, Brussels, in 1973
2. Document in Flemish , reproduced in Wauters 1878, p. 48-49. -
3. “*Diverse werckesellen, vremde ende andere, die voer eenige van den legwerckeren zekere patronen op papier, met colen ende crite gemaict hadden , daer de selve legwerckeren op wrochten*”
4. “ *in contrarien huere ambachts rechten* “
5. See Anna Rapp Buri & Monica Stucky Schürer, *Burgundische Tapisserien*, Munich ,2001, p. 400-403, also Diane Wolfthal, *The Beginnings of Netherlandish Canvas Painting (1400-1530)*, Cambridge , 1989, p. 2-3
6. J. Lestocquoy , *Deux siècles de l’histoire de la tapisserie (1300-1500)*. Paris Arras, Lille, Tournai, Bruxelles (Mémoires de la Comm. dép.des Monuments historiques du Pas-de-Calais, tome XIX ), Arras, 1978, p. 93
7. Guy Delmarcel & Erik Duverger, *Bruges et la tapisserie*, Mouscron 1987, p. 174
8. The French translation by Wauters contains errors: he wrote “ *des étoffes, des animaux, des barques, de l’herbe etc* “
9. *Golden Weavings. Flemish Tapestries of the Spanish Crown* , ed. G.Delmarcel , exh. cat..Mechelen p; 20-21; several in G.Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 1999, p. 66-84
10. Erik Duverger, ‘ Een bestelling van Goenwerk te Edingen in 1457’, *Artes Textiles* VII, 1971, p. 206-208
11. Jozef Duverger, ‘Gielis van de Putte, tapijtwever en tapijthandelaar te Brussel, (ca. 1420—na 1503)’ *Artes textiles* VII, 1971, p. 22: “*eenre tafelen van verduere van finen goude ende zijden*”
12. Jan Van der Stock, *Printing Images in Antwerp*, Rotterdam 1998, p.27-29 and 35

13. Thomas Campbell, 'Netherlandish Production and the Rise of Brussels, 140-1515, in Id., *Tapestry in the Renaissance. Art and Magnificence*, New York-New Haven - London, 202, p. 133-135
14. The most comprehensive study is by Sophie Schneebalg-Perelman, 'Le retouchage' dans la tapisserie bruxelloise ou les origines de l'édit impérial de 1544', *Annales de la Société royale d'Archéologie de Bruxelles*, 50, 1961, p. 191 - 210. - The Edict is published in: G.T. van Ysselsteyn, *Geschiedenis der tapijtweverijen in de Noordelijke Nederlanden*, Leiden, 1936, vol. II, p. 1-21
15. Van Ysselsteyn 1936, p. 11
16. Sophie Schneebalg -Perelman 1961, p.210
17. Sophie Schneebalg -Perelman, 'Peintres retoucheurs des tapisseries au XVIIe siècle, 'Cahiers bruxellois, 5, 1960, p. 282.