

Jagiellonian tapestry “The Building of the Tower of Babel” from the “Story of the Tower of Babel” series



- Author cartoon attributed to Michiel Coxie
- Performed by Pieter van Aelst the Younger workshop
- Date of production ca. 1550
- Place of creation Brussels
- Dimensions height: 481 cm, width: 812 cm
- ID no. ZKWawel 15
- Museum [Wawel Royal Castle – State Art Collection](#)
- Availability Zodiac Room
- Subjects [authority](#), [daily life](#), [religion](#)
- Technique [weaving](#)
- Material [wool](#), [silk](#), [silver thread](#), [gold thread](#)
- Collector collection of King Sigismund Augustus

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- Digitalisation RDW MIC, Digitalisation of the most significant tapestries from the collection of Wawel Royal Castle project
- Tags [Wawel](#), [renesans](#), [tkanina](#), [Biblia](#), [3D plus](#), [król](#), [domena publiczna](#)

In this, one of the three largest tapestries in the collection of King Sigismund II Augustus, we can see the beginning of the story of the construction of the Tower of Babel as described in the Book of Genesis. The scene shows Nimrod, the legendary hunter, and people building a tower “whose top may reach unto heaven” (Genesis 11:1–9) under his leadership. The building under construction is situated in the background, on the right hand side of the textile, whereas on the left side, there can be seen workers erecting the tower. Thanks to the detailed presentation, we can see, among other things, what 16th-century stonemasonry tools looked like. On the vast plain, people bustle around carrying blocks of stone and building a scaffolding. God, barely visible to the right of the tower, watches their feverish work. As in the other biblical tapestries, there is no shortage of accurately rendered images of animals, insects and plants. The Latin inscription placed in the upper border reads in translation: “Nimrod, the first powerful ruler in the world, built a huge tower of baked bricks. God confounded the builders’ languages, and the work was never completed.”

Unfortunately, we are not able to establish where exactly this tapestry was created as the workshop mark has not been preserved. Weaving workshops of Brussels worked for the most affluent clients – popes and kings. Since these workshops were large enterprises employing from a few to a dozen or so skilled weavers, they were able to incur very high costs of textile production. Expensive materials – the best wool, often Spanish or English, silk and the costliest threads of gold and silver – constituted great expenses, not only for the workshop, but also for the customer.

The tapestry was commissioned by Sigismund II Augustus presumably around 1548; it was probably already in the ruler’s possession before 1560. In 1572, the king bequeathed the entire collection of tapestries to his sisters Sophia, Catherine and Anna in for life; after their death, it was to become the property of the Commonwealth.

This tapestry probably adorned the interior of Wawel Castle during the first wedding of Sigismund III Vasa to Anne of Austria in 1592, as well as his second wedding ceremony, to Constance of Austria, in 1605. It was probably also hung in the Collegiate Church of Saint John during the wedding of Władysław IV to Cecilia Renata in September 1637.

Elaborated by Magdalena Ozga (Wawel Royal Castle), editorial team of Małopolska's Virtual Museums,



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Michiel Coxcie in the Netherlandish Romanesque Circle

In the 16th century, Rome attracted artists from the North with a series of discoveries of ancient works, as well as with works of the Renaissance masters – Raphael, Michelangelo and Leonardo. This fascination brought a trend in paintings known as the Netherlandish Romanesque. Its sources were of two kinds. The first source was the migration of artists from the North to the Eternal City: “(...) because he who has not used up a thousand quills and paints, has not painted over a thousand boards in this school [in Rome – ed.] is not worthy of the honourable title of a true artist”, Jan van Scorel is believed to have said. Many years of studies resulted in artists assimilating the Italian repertoire. This allowed them to achieve the high style based on a study of works of antiquity which, combined with the tradition of realistic paintings of the Netherlands, created a specific variant of northern Mannerism. A pioneer of those artistic pilgrimages to Rome was Jan Gossaert, known as Mabuse, who came to the Eternal City with Philip of Burgundy in 1508. Others followed his example, including Jan van Scorel, Pieter Coecke van Aelst, Jan

Sanders van Hemessen, Michiel Coxcie and many others.

Italian patterns spread to the Netherlands also in another way: through copies of works from Italy, drawings and engravings. The best example of this kind of impact was given by works of Bernard van Orley, who had never been to Italy, yet his works revealed the influence of the Italian masters. For this reason, he was also categorised as belonging to the group of Netherlandish Romanist artists. Van Orley was an artist promoting the Italianising style in paintings; he also worked as the main cartoon designer of tapestries workshops in Brussels. His knowledge of Raphael's works had local sources. Van Orley came across cartoons made by Raphael for a series of tapestries intended for the Sistine Chapel, which Pope Leo X had commissioned in the Brussels workshops (*Acts of the Apostles* series, 1515–1516).



Raphael (pr Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino), *Miraculous catch of fish*, a cartoon to the series of tapestries *Acts of the Apostles*, 1515, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), public domain

Works of Michiel Coxcie can be in a way located at an intersection of these two sources of inspiration. He was born in Mechelen in 1499, and he learnt in the workshop of Bernard van Orley. Therefore, during the first period of his art education he was instilled with principles of the Italianising school, which at that time was based on mediated knowledge of Italian formulas, including Raphael's cartoons, popular in Brussels. Michiel Coxcie complemented his studies with a journey to Rome, where he stayed during the years 1530–1539. In the Eternal City, he had an opportunity to familiarise himself *in situ* with works of the masters of the Italian Renaissance and assimilate the entire repertoire of formulas applied at that time with respect to composition, arrangement of figures and studies on the human body. Well-known Italian works of this artist include, for example, the frescoes in the chapel of Saint Barbara in the Church of Santa Maria dell'Anima, made in the years 1532–1534, commissioned by his countryman, Cardinal Willem Enckevoirt, or strongly Raphaelising engravings with the story of Cupid and Psyche. Michiel Coxcie was called "Flemish Raphael" by his contemporaries. In his paintings, he used numerous references to Roman works, due to which he acquired a reputation as an excellent compiler of Italian patterns, although his works were not devoid of a strong creative initiative of the artist himself. Aside from inspiration by Raphael, his works show noticeable strong references to such artists as Perino del Vaga and Baldassare Peruzzi, as well as to works of Leonardo and Sebastiano del Piombo, but primarily to his teacher – Bernard van Orley. Having returned to the Netherlands, Coxcie was very active in his professional life – after the death of Pieter Coecke van Aelst, he became the main cartoon designer of the tapestries workshops in Brussels. In Poland, he is mainly known as a supposed (and most likely) author of cartoons to three series of tapestries with scenes from the Book of Genesis from the collection of tapestries of Sigismund Augustus, which are a part of the collection of Wawel Royal Castle.

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The history of Sigismund Augustus's collection of tapestries

Sigismund Augustus probably ordered some of these fabrics around the year 1548. According to *Wychwalnik weselny [Wedding praiser]* by Stanisław Orzechowski (*Panagyricus Nuptiarum Sigimundi Augusti Poloniae Regis*, ed. 1553), the three series of tapestries: [the History of the First Parents](#), [the Story of Moses](#) and [the Story of Noah](#) already adorned the interiors of Wawel Castle on 30 July 1553, for the wedding celebrations of Sigismund Augustus and Catherine of Austria. It is assumed that after this year the king ordered further fabrics, and that around 1560, the entire collection was already in his possession. In his last will from the year 1571, the heirless Sigismund Augustus stated that his collection of tapestries would be redistributed to his three sisters: Sophie, Duchess of Brunswick; Catherine, Queen of Sweden; and the future Queen of Poland, Anne. According to the king's will, after their deaths, the collection was to become the property of the Polish and Lithuanian Commonwealth. As early as 1572, the tapestries were deposited in the royal castle in Tykocin, and then they were split between the royal residences (Kraków, Niepołomice, Grodno, and Warsaw). In 1578, Anna handed part of the collection to one of the heirs in Stockholm — Catherine — and, by chance, the tapestries returned to Poland in 1587 or 1591, together with the son of the latter, King Sigismund III Vasa.

Traditionally, the tapestries were part of the artistic setting of the most important royal celebrations, even after the death of Sigismund Augustus. The tapestries were used during the king's funeral ceremony in 1572, as well as during the coronation of Henry III of France in 1574. After these events, they returned to their function in 1592, when they decorated the Wawel chambers during the first wedding of Sigismund III Vasa to Anne of Austria, as well as during his second — with her sister Constance of Austria in 1605. Sigismund's tapestries were also used as the decorations in St. John's Archcathedral and in the royal castle in Warsaw, during the wedding of king [Władysław IV](#) to Cecilia Renata in September 1637. During the Swedish Deluge (1655–1657), the collection was moved to an unknown location. Against the will of Sigismund Augustus, the tapestries were treated as private property by King Jan Kazimierz Vasa and became the subject of the political games of the abdicating ruler. The ex-king took a loan against the "Deluge Curtains" (as the tapestries were then collectively labelled), which was handed over to Francis Grattta, a banker and merchant from Gdansk. Then, in 1669, Jan Kazimierz — in order to secure the guaranteed commission for himself — ordered Grattta to hide the tapestries. In spite of this, in February 1670, the collection was borrowed from a "mysterious" storage place in order to decorate the monastery and the church of the Pauline Fathers at Jasna Góra, on the occasion of the wedding of Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki to Eleanor of Austria and for the decoration of the St. John's Archcathedral in Warsaw, during the coronation of Eleanor. The death of Jan Kazimierz did not solve the problem, because the Commonwealth and the heir of the ex-king both had claims to the tapestries being still subject of lien. In 1673, the Deluge Declaration was passed, according to which only the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania could claim the collection of tapestries, and it was the only entity which could redeem them, as

it did in 1724. The recovered collection of fabrics was placed in the monastery of Discalced Carmelites in Warsaw. From then on, the tapestries belonged to the Crown Treasury, managed by consecutive treasurers. They were used, among others, during the Corpus Christi ceremonies, as well as for the decoration of St. John's Archcathedral and Warsaw Castle, on the occasion of the coronation of Stanisław August Poniatowski in 1768.

Since 1785, the collection was stored in the Palace of the Commonwealth, which performed the function of state archive. Ten years later, in November 1795, during the siege of Warsaw laid by the invader's army — on the orders of Catherine II — the fabrics were stolen and brought to the storehouses of the Taurida Palace in St. Petersburg. After 1860, the collection of tapestries was separated, some of which were used to decorate the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg and the tsar's residences in Gatchina and Livadia in the Crimea, while others were transferred to the Museum of Court Stables, the collections of the Academy of Fine Arts, and the Theatre Office. Only after one hundred and twenty-six years — thanks to the Treaty of Riga in 1921—were most of the old tapestries recovered from the Soviet Union; the return of the collection was accomplished in instalments by 1928.

In September 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, a decision was made to move all the tapestries, along with other works from the Wawel treasury, outside Poland. The artefacts were moved to France through Romania, where they were repaired in Aubusson weaving centre. After the French resistance was crushed, the collection was transported by sea to England. The latter also turned out to be a dangerous place, because the Battle of Britain was about to begin. Because of this, the tapestries were transported to Canada on the Polish ship *Batory*, where they were stored in very good conditions. After the end of the world war, the Canadian authorities delayed returning the deposit, because they were concerned with the political situation in Poland after 1945. Maurice Duplessis, the guardian of the tapestries in Quebec, was the one who resisted that idea with particular vehemence. The threat of the appropriation of the tapestries by the Canadian government caused a huge uproar in the country and among the officials of the Polish government-in-exile. Only after the death of Duplessis in 1959, thanks to numerous interventions and the great efforts of leading Polish figures, were the tapestries reclaimed and returned to Wawel, in February 1961.

Two of the identified tapestries from the former collection of Sigismund Augustus are outside Wawel. The first fabric — *The moral decline of humanity* from series *the Story of Noah* — was found in the Kremlin and returned to Poland in 1977, as a gift of the Soviet authorities for the reconstruction of the Warsaw castle, where it is held to this day. On the other hand, the other one — the only tapestry intended for presentation above windows, preserved in its entire form — for some unknown reason, found its way from Russia to the antiquarian market. It was purchased by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and it has been part of their collection since 1952.

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From Ornament of Late Antiquity to Netherlandish Grotesque

On one of the seven hills of Rome – the Esquiline Hill – caves full of ancient paintings were excavated around 1480 under the foundations of medieval buildings. Their walls were decorated with fantastic, light and symmetrical structures created of figural, animal and floral motifs. *La grotte*, or caves, were in fact ruins of the villa of the Emperor Nero. It was called *Domus Aurea* because of the extraordinarily rich decoration of the walls and the inner part of the dome, which were covered with gold and paintings. They were created between AD 54 and 68 and related to the turn of the Third Style and Fourth Style of Pompeian painting.

The term grotesque (*grottesche*) was derived from the name of the finding (*la grotte*). The way the ornament is called can also be translated as “weird, weirdness”. In its form, grotesque resembled



Grotesque, Raphael Santi, decoration of the Vatican loggias, 1518, source: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raphael), public domain

ornaments of ancient origin popular in the Renaissance, namely arabesque or Islamic moresque. However, they both assumed the shape of a more or less stylised braided plants; on the other hand, grotesque was enriched with numerous additional motifs, and it created a fantastic structure. Formally, the latter was also close to its predecessor – the late medieval braided plants – since characters and animals were entwined in it in the same way. However, in medieval ornament it had an apotropaic or allegorical function. Renaissance ornamentation was immensely influenced by the discovery of *Domus Aurea*. The finding was the main source of inspiration for artists, even though at that time there were known examples of other ancient grotesques decorating, for instance, the Colosseum and Hadrian's villa in Tivoli. The popularity and strengthening of the fashion for Renaissance grotesque was primarily an effect of the influence of

works by artists from the early 16th century, which were travesty of ancient paintings. The most important works of art in this field were paintings of the Vatican loggias, the Villa Madama and Palazzo Baldassini – the works of Raphael and his apprentice Giovanni da Udine. They were almost a total novelty in the field of decoration and this contributed to their extraordinary popularity among contemporary artists.

Grotesque became a decoration type widely known and used in the 1st half of the 16th century (especially after 1520) thanks to the Italian works mentioned above, as well as widely accessible patterns created by ornamentalists.

Through numerous imitations of ancient grotesque in various art centres, this ornament gained its local variants. Netherlandish grotesque, even though based on the same formula as the Italian one, had a slightly different structure and elements. It gained extraordinary popularity thanks to replicated in graphic arts designs of Cornelis Floris or Cornelis Bos (e.g. *The Book of Moresque* of 1554), ornamentalists unequalled in their skill and imagination.

Initially, Netherlandish grotesque included mostly floral motifs but in time, because of oriental inspirations, exotic animals and fantastic creatures appeared, as well. The following mythological motifs were depicted particularly frequently: pairs of deities, their frolics, Bacchic processions, and various fantastic creatures or hybrids of human, animals and plants. In their details, depictions of an allegorical nature and even allusions to the exoticism of the New World (e.g. figures of Indians) can be noticed. Netherlandish grotesque seemed to be, above all, more filled up than the Italian one. It had a much richer repertoire of motifs, and its spaces, separated in a certain way by the structure (scaffolding), were almost entirely filled with ripe fruit garlands and putti, as well as exotic plants and animals. However, *horror vacui* did not disturb the sense of order, which was controlled by the symmetry of the arrangement of all elements of the decoration. Interestingly, in its expanded form, the scaffolding structure, on which individual elements were based, was similar to metal fittings and fragments of rolled metal sheet, heralding the ferrule ornament that appeared in the art of the Netherlands in the mid-16th century. The specificity of Netherlandish grotesque was its characteristic dualism manifested in the almost encyclopaedic realism of some depictions of plants and animals (species of which we are able to recognise), as well as fantasy affecting construction of its form, typical of this ornament.

See also:

Borders of tapestries of the [Story of the First Parents](#), [Story of Noah](#) and [Story of the Tower of Babel](#) series;

Grotesque tapestries of monogram, heraldic and under-window types

Grotesque decoration of a [pharmaceutical mortar](#)

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