

Jagiellonian tapestry “The Spread of the Nations” 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: 494 cm, width: 275 cm
- Author's designation weaver's mark in the bottom right corner, mark of Brussels on the bottom part of the border
- ID no. ZKWawel 18
- 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
- Object copyright Wawel Royal Castle – State Art Collection
- Digital images copyright public domain
- Digitalisation RDW MIC, Digitalisation of the most significant tapestries from the collection of Wawel Royal Castle project
- Tags [Wawel](#), [dwór](#), [renesans](#), [tkanina](#), [Biblia](#), [3D plus](#), [król](#), [domena publiczna](#)

In front of us, the last act of the history of the Tower of Babel takes place – *The Spread of the Nations*. On a meadow at the foot of the hill, a group of people can be seen, with two men standing and five women sitting next to them on the grass. All attempts to communicate with one another have been in vain, the evidence of which is a tablet in the hands of the woman in a blue dress. It is filled with illegible characters; apparently, this method of communication has also failed. In the deep background, there are no longer traces of the tower; only the central building with a portico remains, similar to the one that we know from the tapestry [The Building of the Tower of Babel](#). People visible in the background start dispersing in different directions. Almost no one has remained from the crowd of builders. The Latin inscription in a blue cartouche at the top part of the border reads in translation: “The Lord scattered them.”

A wide border along the top and bottom edges of the textile is similar to the one of the tapestry [The Confusion of Tongues](#) – with figures of putti placed in a decoration of ornamental slats, garlands of olive branches and bouquets. The sides of the tapestry are closed with a narrow border characteristic of the entire collection, with bands interlaced with flowers.

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 Gratta, a banker and merchant from Gdansk. Then, in 1669, Jan Kazimierz — in order to secure the guaranteed commission for himself — ordered Gratta 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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In a weaving workshop

Brussels weaving workshops worked for the wealthiest clients: popes and rulers. These were large enterprises, employing from a few to a dozen qualified weavers, capable of bearing the very high costs of making fabrics. Expensive materials — the best wool, often Spanish or English, silk and the most expensive threads of gold and silver — constituted a very serious expense, not only for the workshop, but also for the client.

Weavers reproduced the pattern — cardboard — which was previously made by specialized painters, the so-called cartoonists. Their task was to make a tapestry design in a 1: 1 ratio in a mirror image. If an arras such as [Anger of God](#) has a surface of 432 cm x 435 cm, the cardboard which was necessary to make it had to have the same dimensions. Cardboard was usually painted on thick paper, which was sometimes glued with canvas, for greater durability. Tapestries were woven on the left side. The weaver sitting at the loom had a cardboard hung behind him, which was reflected in the mirror placed in front of the loom and the weaver. In this way, the performer could see a pattern in the mirror that he was gradually weaving. Cardboard could be used by the weavers many times. Weaving workshops have performed even a whole series of tapestries several times on the same subject model, based on the projects they had, with smaller or larger changes. However, the most valuable was always *editio princeps*, i.e. the first model performance. An example of such a practice are three biblical series from the collection of Zygmunt August, made according to cardboard probably by [Michie Coxcie](#). They have many replicas: the cycle, [the Story of Noah](#), repeated nineteen times, [the History of the first Parents](#) five times, a [History of the Tower of Babel](#), twice.

Cardboard was treated purely for use, so it is difficult to find today in museum collections. One of the few examples is Design of a landscape and animal tapestry with a rhinoceros and an elephant by the artist

from the circle of Pieter Coecke van Aelsta, preserved in the British Museum collection, which could serve as a model for the lost Sigismund tapestry in an analogous manner, depicting rhinoceros, elephants and monkeys on trees (mentioned in the inventories of 1669 and 1764).

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