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Art & Textiles

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**Fabric as Material and
Concept in Modern Art
from Klimt to the Present**

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Tristan Weddigen

Unfolding Textile Spaces: Antiquity / Modern Period

Alternative Narratives

Western history of the visual arts is traditionally narrated from the standpoint of painting. In this story of artistic progress, the invention of central perspective in the Italian Renaissance, as an optical-scientific rationale, plays a paradigmatic role, from which art would work itself free only with modernism and the avant-garde. Aesthetic experience and display in the Middle Ages and the early modern period was, however, much richer and more varied in artistic media than our modernist art museums, with their focus on painting, suggest. Until the nineteenth century, after architecture and the goldsmith's craft, textiles were held in the highest esteem as decoration for sacred and profane interior and exterior spaces. Because media and materials shape taste and notions of art in different ways, textiles must receive more attention, so that we may acquire a more complete picture of our artistic and cultural past. This is also motivated by the fact that, as the present exhibition proves, modern and contemporary art have developed an increasing interest in textile media, materials, techniques, and metaphors, which in turn opens and sharpens the eye for earlier phenomena.¹

By example of two case studies, the following essay will try to show that a history of art, based on the invention of painterly central perspective, needs to be supplemented with alternative historical narratives. While the perspectival image offers the individual, static eye an optical, immaterial, transparent, and continuous illusionary space resembling an open window, tapestries that were highly present in medieval and early modern environments make reference to a flat, opaque, tactile, bodily, material, and immersive concept and experience of space. First, the spatial effect of Flemish, late medieval wall hangings is examined with so-called "verdures" studded with plant motifs, and second, that of Italian "grotesque" tapestries of the Renaissance. The intention is not so much to highlight the classical differences between north and south, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but rather to emphasize the commonalities to which Aby Warburg already referred in a well-known essay of 1907. The transhistorical and medium-specific concept of a textile pictorial space shall offer a small contribution to a more multifaceted history of art that revises anew Erwin Panofsky's 1927 theses on perspective and carries them into the present day.²

Hanging Gardens

A series of tapestries from the early sixteenth century, today titled *The Manorial Life*, has been preserved in six parts and was presumably created in Brussels; it can



Fig. 1 *The Manorial Life: The Embroiderer*, (*La vie seigneuriale: La broderie*), ca. 1520, tapestry, wool and silk, Brussels workshop, ca. 265 × 224 cm, Musée de Cluny – Musée National du Moyen-Âge, Paris

1 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, 1972); Martin Kemp, *The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat* (New Haven, 1990); Wolfgang Brassat, *Tapissereien und Politik: Funktionen, Kontexte und Rezeption eines repräsentativen Mediums*, diss. Marburg, 1989 (Berlin, 1992); Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford and New York, 2007).

2 Aby M. Warburg, "Arbeitende Bauern auf burgundischen Teppichen," *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* 2, new series, 18 (1907), pp. 41–47; Erwin Panofsky, "Die Perspektive als 'symbolische Form,'" in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg 1924/25* (1927), pp. 258–330.

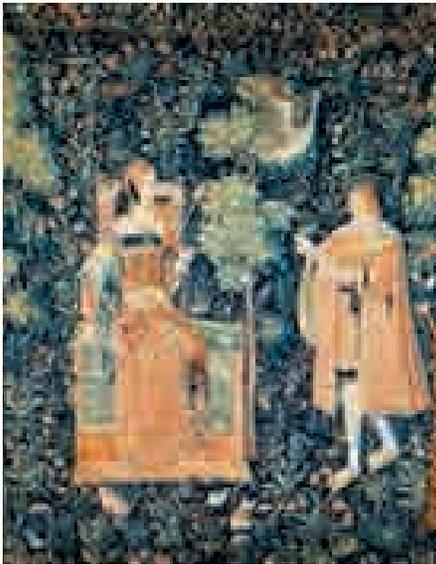


Fig. 2 *The Manorial Life: The Spinner (La vie seigneuriale: La lecture)*, ca. 1520, Brussels workshop, tapestry, wool and silk, ca. 295 x 239 cm, Musée de Cluny – Musée National du Moyen-Âge, Paris

3 Michel Foucault, “Des espaces autres (conférence au Cercle d’études architecturales, 14 mars 1967),” in *Architecture, mouvement, continuité* 5 (October 1984), pp. 46–49; Adolfo Salvatore Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1993), pp. 488–94; Anna Rapp Buri and Monica Stucky-Schürer, *Burgundische Tapisserien* (Munich, 2001), pp. 380–96; Fabienne Joubert, *Musée national du Moyen Âge, Thermes de Cluny: La Tapisserie médiévale*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 2002), pp. 92–121.

4 Birgit Franke, “Domäne und aristokratische Repräsentation: Bauerndarstellungen in franko-flämischen Tapisserien des 15. Jahrhunderts,” in *Porträt—Landschaft—Interieur: Jan van Eycks Rolin-Madonna im ästhetischen Kontext*, ed. Christiane Kruse and Felix Thürlenmann (Tübingen, 1999), pp. 73–90; Laura Weigert, “La Spécificité de la tapisserie comme médium dans la constitution de la ‘Vie seigneuriale,’” in *Die Methodik der Bildinterpretation: Les Méthodes de l’interprétation de l’image; Deutsch-französische Kolloquien 1998–2000*, ed. Andrea von Hülsen-Esch and Jean-Claude Schmitt, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 2002), vol. 2, pp. 529–50; Laura Weigert, “Chambres d’amour: Tapestries of Love and the Texturing Space,” *Oxford Art Journal* 31, no. 3 (2009), pp. 317–36.

be used to illustrate a late medieval, northern textile conception of space (figs. 1–2). Such a set was called a *chamber*, when it clothed all of the walls of a room, often with flowered verdures and sometimes supplemented with furniture upholstery featuring a corresponding motif as to simulate grassy benches. The tapestry series, which Fabienne Joubert has examined, presents gallant courtiers and all sorts of animals against a flat meadow dropping down vertically like a curtain or a backdrop that is dotted with tufts of plants and is structured only by individual bushes and small trees without a horizon. This conventional millefleur series, which was issued several times and probably produced for a French clientele, transformed any interior space into a simulated, infinite floral paradise, a hanging garden of Babylon, or a textile heterotopia, i.e., an autonomous location where the boundaries between reality and fiction are suspended. In this immersive thicket, the figures and the viewers seem to swap roles.³

Laura Weigert has compared the ornamental language of these *chambres d’amour*, compiling conventional pictorial motifs, with courtly love lyrics composed from tropes, and also has interpreted them as an expression of nostalgia for a vanishing courtly culture. In the woolen cocoon, the aristocratic upper class, or rather those urbane early capitalists who strove to appropriate such a court culture, was invited to pursue its luxurious and romantic leisure (*otium*). These elitist genre pictures glorify courtly leisure and love: there is hunting and strolling, making of music, poetry, and conversation, picnicking, flirting, and, as Diana once did before Actaeon, bathing in nature. All the senses are stimulated and seduced. The motif of the pastoral concert (*concert champêtre*) and luncheon on the grass (*déjeuner sur l’herbe*) allures, entertains, and confuses the eye as a result of the variety of plants, animals, and even fabrics imitated in the fabric, and as a result of the incongruous montage of spatial, symbolic, and figural motifs, including, for example, a halberdier from a print by Albrecht Dürer.⁴

No clearing nor horizon allows one to envision an end to the genteel interlude or recall the cares of daily life beyond this artificial paradise. Through enclosing the perspectival power of sight in a flat wall of plants, the other senses are yet that more excited. In this greened space, which can be viewed from an ever-changing line of sight, a society cherishes the illusion of an afternoon in a secret garden. The walls of plants do not extend to a pictorial depth behind the picture plane as in the case of a perspectival tableau, but rather in front of it, i.e., into the social space in which the viewers stand, move, and interact. The figures, like the tufts of plants, appear scattered and standing isolated from each other, so that figure and pattern seem to coalesce. The ornamental allover, the surface-covering design of the ground in which the three-dimensional figures seem to be inserted in a collage, represents an anachronistic construction of space for the pictorial culture of that time, even in northern Europe. This cannot be solely explained by a division of labor between flower and figure weavers, but rather by a wistful neo-primitiveness, adhering to the media- and class-specific conventions of tapestry.

Somewhat aloof from all this activity, two courtly ladies apply themselves to embroidering and spinning. Based on the model of the embroidering, spinning,

weaving, and knitting Virgin Mary—who weaves the Logos, the word of God, into flesh—textile handwork and housework are considered virtuous and restraining of female impulses. The Embroiderer (fig. 1) sits amidst tufts of flowers and works colored wool into a small cushion cover into which she, imitating the Mother of God, embroiders the initials of Christ. Her work depicts a flower meadow and thus mirrors the verdure within itself. Similar to the table mirror brought to her, which signifies prudence and not vanity, this *mise en abyme*—the presentation of a tapestry within a tapestry—allegorizes *virtus*, that power and virtue of textile handwork, which, through the diligent processing of the raw material, creates a seemingly animated second nature and even self-awareness.

The Spinner (fig. 2), on the other hand, is absorbed in that art that Eve developed after being expelled from the Garden of Eden in order to cover her sins. The nobleman who seeks to enmesh the spinner with his love verses, his poetic *textus*, is more challenged than frightened by her loyal lapdog. She knows how to play with the man as she maddens the cat with her spindle. She has his thread of life in her hands like a Fate. Moreover, sitting on a throne decked out with verdures, she also points self-reflexively to the textile medium in which she appears as a figure and which she simultaneously affects to produce indirectly as a spinner.

These two figures express features characteristic of the textile medium, which as a flat, material, and ornamental image creates a physical, aesthetic, and social space by means of folding and unfurling. Through the presentation of their work, the embroiderer and the spinner artfully reveal the artificiality, the material and handicraft nature of verdures, those projection screens of courtly leisure and love. At the same time, they also romanticize and veil the real conditions in which the textiles were manufactured. As a result of their aesthetic self-reflection and self-assertion, the verdures not only elevate the interweaving of the sexes to a high art but also stage tapestry-making and the textile arts as a medium that creates its own, much more powerful mode of illusion, autonomous from the paradigm of perspectival painting.⁵

Grotesque Spaces

The triumphal march of Renaissance central perspective from Italy throughout Europe—along with the concept of the image as an open window that was introduced by Leon Battista Alberti and with Isaac Newton’s subsequent conception of a homogenous “absolute space”—marginalized that earlier textile construction and experience of space, as illustrated by the verdures. Now, even in the medium of tapestry, foreshortened architecture was adopted despite being unsuitable for a hanging, crimped, foldable, and portable medium, as was noted in 1665, for example, by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, superintendent of the royal Gobelins Tapestry Manufactory. Nevertheless, in the early modern period, it is possible to reconstruct a continuous and silent textile discourse that offers an alternative to the modern master narrative of the history of painting under the leadership of *disegno*, the intellectualized practice of drawing. Tapestries *all’antica*, which were also created in Brussels during the same period of time as the *Manorial Life* although based

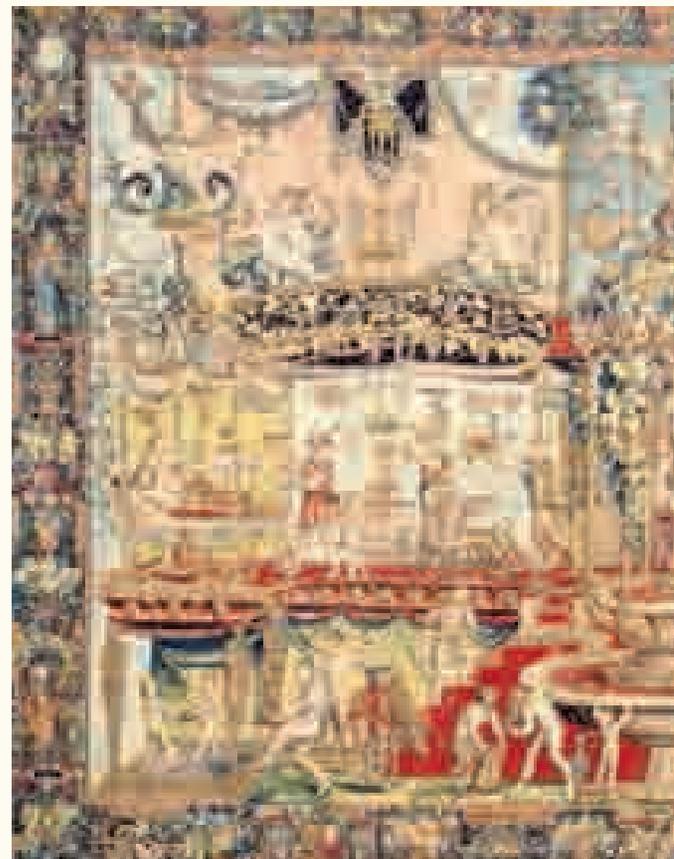


Fig. 3 *The Triumph of the Gods: The Triumph of Bacchus* (*Tenture des Triomphes des dieux: Le Triomphe de Bacchus*), atelier of Geubel after Giovanni da Udine, Brussels, ca. 1560, tapestry, wool, silk, gold, woven, 495 x 764 cm, Collection du Mobilier national, Paris

5 Robert L. Wyss, “Die Handarbeiten der Maria: Eine ikonographische Studie unter Berücksichtigung der textilen Techniken,” in *Artes minores: Dank an Werner Abegg*, ed. Michael Stettler and Mechthild Lemberg (Bern, 1973), pp. 113–88; Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London, 1984); Johannes Endres, “Textures and Cuts: The Textile Metaphor in Jörg Wickram’s ‘The Golden Thread,’” in *Unfolding the Textile Medium in Early Modern Art and Literature*, ed. Tristan Weddigen (Emsdetten and Berlin, 2011), pp. 15–30.

6 John Shearman, *Raphael’s Cartoons in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen and the Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* (London, 1972); Wolfgang Kemp, “‘Disegno’: Beiträge zur Geschichte des Begriffs zwischen 1547 und 1607,” *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 19



(1974), pp. 219–40; Ekkehard Mai and Joachim Rees, eds., *Das Capriccio als Kunstprinzip: Zur Vorgeschichte der Moderne von Arcimboldo und Callot bis Tiepolo und Goya; Malerei—Zeichnung—Graphik*, exh. cat. Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, Kunsthau Zürich, Zurich, Kunsthistorisches Museum im Palais Harrach, Vienna (Milan, 1996); Ekkehard Mai and Joachim Rees, eds., *Kunstform Capriccio: Von der Grotteske zur Spieltheorie der Moderne* (Cologne, 1998); Leon Battista Alberti, *Das Standbild—Die Malkunst—Grundlagen der Malerei / De statua—De pictura—Elementa picturae*, ed. Oskar Bätschmann et al. (Darmstadt, 2000); Dorothea Scholl, *Von den 'Grottesken' zum Grottesken: Die Konstituierung einer Poetik des Grottesken in der italienischen Renaissance*, diss. Kiel 2000 (Münster, 2004); Paul Fréart de Chantelou, *Bernini in Paris: Das Tagebuch des Paul Fréart de Chantelou über den Aufenthalt Gianlorenzo Berninis am Hof Ludwigs XIV.*, ed. Philipp Zitzlsperger and Pablo Schneider (Berlin, 2006), p. 161, entry of September 16, 1665.

7 Giorgio Vasari, "Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori," in *Le opere di Giorgio Vasari con nuove annotazioni e commenti*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 9 vols. (Florence, 1906), vols. 1–7, vol. 5, pp. 595–96, and vol. 6, p. 555; Nicole Dacos, *La Découverte de la Domus Aurea et la formation des grottesques à la Renaissance* (London, 1969); Nicole Dacos, *Le logge di Raffaello: Maestro e bottega di fronte all'antico*, 2nd ed. (Rome, 1986); Irene Iacopi, *Domus Aurea* (Milan, 1999); Thomas P. Campbell, ed., *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence*, exh. cat. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (New Haven, 2002), pp. 224–52; Thomas P. Campbell, *Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty: Tapestries at the Tudor Court* (New Haven, 2007), pp. 267–75; Jean Vittet and Arnauld Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Collection de tapisseries de Louis XIV* (Dijon, 2010), pp. 149–53 and 260–71; Lorraine Karafel, "Site Specific? Raphael's all'antica tapestries and the Vatican's Sala dei Pontefici," in Weddigen 2011 (see note 5), pp. 55–64.

on Italian models, such as the revolutionary *Acts of the Apostles* founded on cartoons by Raphael, indeed give rise to the expectation, in the sense of a scholarly progress of arts, that the late Gothic textile space was coming to an end. This is, however, contradicted by the following example, which transfers the media-specific characteristics of the medieval verdure to a modern genre of image: the neo-antique grotesque.⁶

The eight-part tapestry series *The Triumph of the Gods*, the cartoons for which the Medici Pope Leo X commissioned from Raphael and his workshop around 1517–20 and which was probably created in the studio of Pieter van Aelst around 1519–21, have been missing since the Napoleonic occupation of Rome. Nonetheless two pieces from an edition made in the fifteen-forties and three further ones from the fifteen-sixties, as well as a seven-part reinterpretation after designs by Noël Coypel from the seventeenth century, have survived. The series, which Giorgio Vasari attributed to Raphael's collaborator Giovanni da Udine, depicts the triumph of Bacchus, the ship of Venus, the deeds of Hercules, those of Minerva, the tribute to Mars, Apollo, and the Muses, faith under the seven virtues, and grammar under the six fine arts. The tapestries complemented the astrological program of the vault of the Sala dei Pontefici in the Vatican Palace, which Perino del Vaga and Giovanni da Udine painted around 1519–20, as Thomas P. Campbell and Lorraine Karafel have recently shown. The decoration transported the clerics gathered there into a neo-ancient world and suggested that cosmic and divine forces predicate, advance, and protect the new imperial greatness of the papacy.

The series represents the first and pioneering tapestries that make use of the grotesque *all'antica* as a surface-covering motif. The grotesques, those hybrid creatures and forms set ornamentally in filigree, symmetric illusionistic architecture, go back to the wall and ceiling paintings of the Domus Aurea or Golden House of Nero in Rome. Its more than one hundred rooms, painted in the seventh decade after Christ, were rediscovered at the end of the Quattrocento and, as a result of their having been buried, were thought to be a series of artificial caves or "grottos."⁷

While the ceiling paintings and plaster ornaments of the Vatican's Sala dei Pontefici are evidently based on the Room of the Gilded Vaults (Room 80) of the Domus Aurea, the tapestry *The Triumph of Bacchus* (fig. 3) recommends itself in particular for analyzing the spatial composition of the whole series of the *Grottesques of Leo X*. Here, the structurally implausible, licentious, almost "drunken" pergola-like architectural framework of the Bacchic scene blends the structural stage elements of a Renaissance theater with the spatial fields and panels of frescoes of the late third and early fourth styles as could be found, for instance, in the lunette frescoes of the Neronian Domus (especially in Room 36).

The characteristic feature of such grotesques is the piling up of two- and three-dimensional pictorial elements and also, vice versa, the gravitational motif of hanging: robes and draperies, garlands of fruit and foliage, grape and acanthus vines, jeweled chains, bands and banderoles, wall hangings and sails, as to be found in nearly all of the ceiling and wall decorations in the Domus Aurea,

reflecting universal codes of festiveness. Because the grotesque tapestries emphasize these hanging motifs within an architectural framework, they make reference to their own mediality: a tapestry is not architecture but rather attaches itself to it and conceals and negates it. Raphael had already pursued a similar thought in the series of tapestries of the Leonine *Putti Playing* of 1520–21, in which the rings used to hang up the tapestries are woven in the upper bordures themselves and which, with the help of a tapestry-in-the-tapestry, point to hanging as a specific characteristic of the medium.

The spatial incoherencies of the Bacchus tapestry—for instance the illogical corner solutions, the contradiction between fore- and background, the birds and architectural elements pressed flat—quite deliberately imitate the pseudo-perspectival, architectural illusionism of antiquity, which regularly tips onto the plane and whose incorrectness afforded Renaissance artists starting with Filippo Brunelleschi a rare, art-historical sense of triumph. Bright fields of color fill up the intermediate spaces in the architecture in such a way that they flatten and destroy any coherence in terms of spatial depth, something that represented a provocation in the age of scientific perspectival illusionism. This decorative element is taken directly from the Corridor of the Eagles (Room 50) of the Domus Aurea. It also apparently imitates stage elements of spanned cloths (Room 70) and refers in color and surface to characteristic material features of the textile medium.⁸

Similar to the medieval-seeming but contemporary verdures, also the *Grotesques of Leo X* emphasize a textile planarity or spatial ambivalence. With the citing and transforming of motifs from antique and modern works, as well from paintings and tapestry projects by Raphael's workshop, the spatial flatness is accompanied by a temporal depth that suggests a reviving of ancient times. A comparable reflection on the textile pictorial medium is also found in Raphael's frescos: in 1516–18, at the Villa Farnesina, he spanned the vault of the loggia with two painted tapestries imitating awnings and representing an image-within-the-image (*arazzi riportati*).

As in the case of the tapestries that he painted on the vault of the Vatican Stanza d'Eliodoro around 1514, the painted canopies at the Villa Farnesina defend the medium-specific freedom of tapestry, which liberates itself as a flat, material, and portable image from the rules of perspective illusionism and the architectural framework without violating the *decorum*, as for instance Sebastiano Serlio noted in 1537. They thus present an medium-specific solution to avoiding a perspective that is true to the line, but whose steep point of view (*sotto in su*) would have been inappropriate for the heavenly figures depicted.⁹

The sophistication of the *Grotesques of Leo X* thus does not consist in the lavish amassing of grotesque motifs, but rather in a cunning, archeological neo-primitivism *all'antica*, a timely anachronism—in its reception of antiquity, Mannerism digs deeper. The impression that this series was intended as an aesthetic provocation is reinforced by its implicit reference to the well-known critique of grotesque murals of the second style that Vitruvius, following Horace, raises in his *Ten Books on Architecture*: since painting may only portray what exists—or at least is factually

8 Antonio Manetti, *Vita di Filippo Brunelleschi*, ed. Carla-chiara Perrone (Rome, 1992), pp. 53–54.

9 Sebastiano Serlio, *Regole generali di architettura sopra le cinque maniere de gli edifici* (Venice, 1537), chap. 11, fol. 69r: "si potranno finger alcuni panni attaccati al muro, come cosa mobile, & in quelli dipingere ciò che piace, perché così facendo, non romperà l'ordine, e fingerà il vero, servando il decoro." Ibid., fol. 60v: Raffael "fece nel nascimento delle lunette figure piacevoli, fuggendo gli scorci . . . Ma quando fu alla sommità della volta . . . nondimeno per dar vaghezza a chi mirava, togliendo via la durezza di tanti scorci, finse un panno di color celeste attaccato ad alcuni festoni, come cosa mobile . . . & è tanto bene accomodata tutta quell'opera insieme, che si può giudicar quella loggia piuttosto un apparato per qualche trionfo, che una pittura perpetua, fatta nel muro."

possible—in a manner that is true to nature, the depictions of strangely proportioned hybrid creatures and architectures that are specious, grow organically, tower like candelabra, or stand on their heads, as colorfully and as well as they might be painted, have to be called untrue, distasteful, incommensurate, monstrous, scandalous, and even depraved. Therefore, the *Grotesques of Leo X* attest to an interest in the “unclassical” of antiquity.¹⁰

The tapestries, however, imitate not the wall frescoes of the Domus Aurea, especially since these were buried under rubble, but rather the ceiling frescoes situated above them with their hanging motifs and overgrown pergola frames, their sails, cloths, spanned garlands, and fields of color, as, for example, in the Room with the Vault of the Little Owls (Room 29, fig. 4), in the Yellow Vault (Room 31), and in the Black Vault (Room 32). Especially the white-grounded vault of the fourth style—like that of the Cryptoporticus (Room 92) in which “Zuan da Udene firlano,” among many other artists, left behind his signature—imitates embroidered Hellenistic tarpaulins, sails, and sunshades. These are called to mind in the tapestry by those sails (*vela*) that are spanned over the Bacchic scene. As in the Vatican Loggetta of Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena of 1517, Giovanni da Udine stretched the white-grounded vault frescoes of the Domus Aurea and pulled them down over the walls like a second skin.

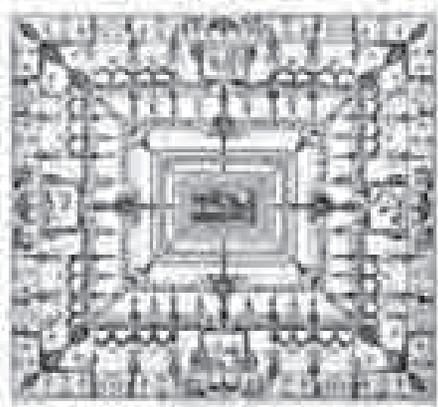


Fig. 4 Reconstruction of the Room with the Vault of the Little Owls (Sala delle civette, Room 29) in the Domus Aurea, copper-engraving, in *Vestigia delle terme di Tito e loro interne pitture*, ed. Ludovico Mirri and Marco Carloni, Rome, 1776, plate 6

Despite their absurdity and contradictoriness, the grotesques generate an aesthetic unity that is laid over the architecture, but, at the same time, take away architecture’s fundamental gravity (*gravitas*). In the middle of the Cinquecento Pirro Ligorio thus noted that painted grotesques could produce a visual consonance thanks to their flowers and tendrils that interconnect everything and unify any irregular space even though they might appear “unsymphonic” in themselves; the filigree grotesques of the ancients were full of earnest thoughts, linked with each other, just as the Fates tie everything with the thread of life.¹¹

The fact that, specifically, the textile quality of the ceiling decorations of the Domus Aurea is again found in the wall hangings of Leo X shows the tapestries to be archeological interpretations of ancient vault paintings *a grottesche*. Therefore, *The Triumph of the Gods* does not represent a blind transfer of antique wall frescoes into modern tapestry in the sense of portable frescoes *all’antica*. Instead, it interprets the antique grotesque frescoes as painted textile ceiling and wall coverings, which they quasi translate back into their own original textile medium. In a way that is similar to the case of a painted ekphrasis—a poetic description of a painting that an artist translates back into a painting—the series of tapestries should therefore be understood as a material- and medium-specific reconstruction of those wall hangings of antiquity, which in the Domus Aurea only seemed to have survived as painted imitations. On a second level referring to Vitruvius, the tapestry series thus by all means represents something that exists or is possible, namely, a grotesque tapestry. In the *Grotesques of Leo X*, the antique grotesques returned to their true, portable medium.

10 Horace, *Ars poetica*, 1–14; Vitruvius, *De architectura libri decem*, book 7, chap. 5.

11 Pirro Ligorio, “Libro dell’antichità: Grottesche,” in Dacos 1969 (see note 7), pp. 161–82, esp. p. 161: “Perché si accomodano in ogni luogo degli edifici, et nei regolati et negli storpiati, et come per una certa consonanza et licenza del potere commutare, fanno una sinfonia, se bene parino asinfoniche”; and *ibid.*, p. 168: “Dunque non sono pitture vane, ne insognate dagli antichi: ma prudentemente dipinte et legate in un filo, come sono le cose del fuso delle Parche, di Cloto, di Lachesi et di Atrapo. Le quali ancora ne le hanno in simili pittura sottili dipinte, per mostrare quanto sia debole la vita.”

Textile Layers of Meaning

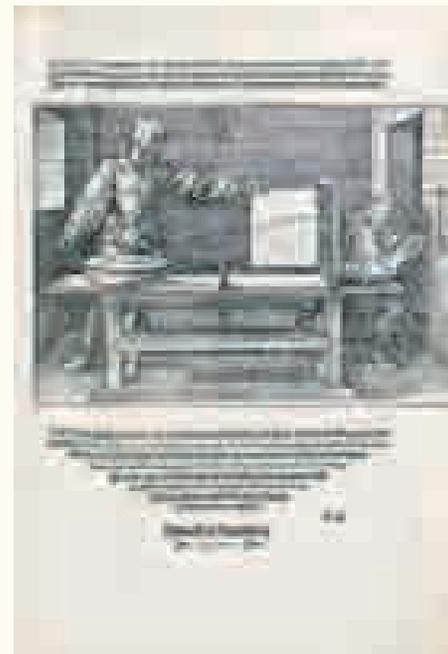
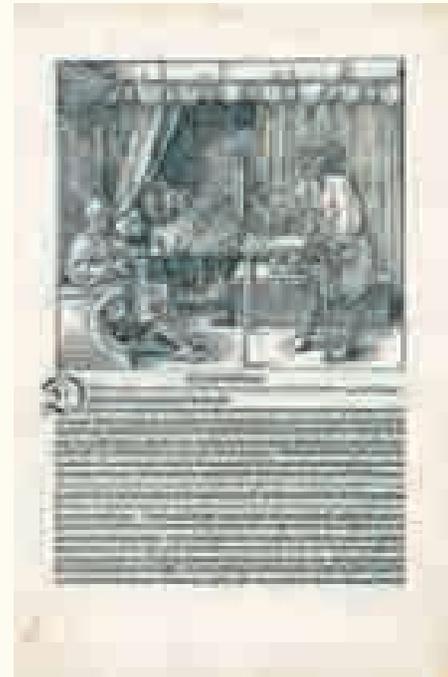
From here, it would be possible to follow various historical threads, for instance the question of the tense relationship between architecture and textile décor in the Cinquecento. Even when textile spatial culture declined considerably after 1800, and then once again after 1900, new forms of textile discourse nevertheless arose. They include the transferring of Eugène Chevreul's color theory of simultaneous contrast from textile chemistry to painting, Gottfried Semper's "clothing principle" in architecture, Walter Benjamin's archeology of the bourgeois interior, the revival and reinvention of a French-Gothic tapestry tradition by Jean Lurçat, Gilles Deleuze's contemplations on the Baroque fold, the rediscovery of the textile material in Post-Minimal Art, the technological myth of the origin of the computer in the Jacquard loom, and many others.¹²

However, one work shall be singled out here in conclusion that explicitly invokes the relationship between the textile image and early modern central perspective, Sigmar Polke's *Measuring Clothes* of 1994 (fig. 6), in which striped clothing and fabric are glued on a canvas and combined with figures from an engraving. The latter stem from a didactic plate in Abraham Bosse's 1647 treatise on perspective, *Universal Method by Sieur Girard Desargues Lyonnais Concerning the Practice of Perspective* (fig. 7), which illustrates his explanation of the lines of sight. The reader is supposed to connect four threads with the corners of a square staked out on the floor and bring them up to his eye in order to recognize that this square can be defined, when observed from an arbitrary point of view, as a section through the pyramid of vision by means of four lines of sight. Bosse's instructions paradoxically lead to the incident that the person conducting the experiment covers his one peeping eye with his hand, whereby the seeing of seeing—the *cogito* of painting—itself proves to be impossible; the ends of the threads instead ripple freely and wildly in his hand, and our gaze follows them just as chaotically on the surface of the image, resulting in the fact that we lose sight of the aim of the experiment: understanding spatial perception.¹³

Polke presumably projected Bosse's figures onto his canvas with the help of an overhead or slide projector and then painted them, as if he himself were attempting to depict and materialize the section through the pyramid of vision as described by Bosse, and thus the act of seeing and the projected representation of it. This subversive, anti-rationalistic use of the perspectival *camera obscura* is reinforced by the fact that Polke shifted the position of the rearmost figure in comparison to the model so that its pyramid of vision overlaps with the architecture of the stairs and is thus made impossible. The courtly presentation of science thus becomes a theater of the absurd.¹⁴

We may assume that Polke photocopied Bosse's plate from the highly successful publication *Anamorphosis or Curious Perspective*, by Jurgis Baltrušaitis (1873–1944), which was published for the first time in 1955. With his richly illustrated study on anamorphosis, that liminal case of central perspective, the Lithuanian art historian aimed at a reinterpretation of the idealistic master narrative of art:

"Perspective no longer appears as a science of reality. It is a technique of halluci-



Figs. 5 a+b Final leaf of book: Albrecht Dürer, *Uderweysung der messung mit dem zirkel und richtscheyt in Linien ebnen unnd ganzen corporen* (Nuremberg, 1525).

12 Michel Eugène Chevreul, *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs et de l'assortiment des objets colorés*, ed. Michel Henri Chevreul (Paris, 1839); Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder Praktische Aesthetik: Ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1860–63); Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, in collaboration with Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, vol. 5: *Das Passagen-Werk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main, 1982); Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli: Leibniz et le baroque* (Paris, 1988); Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst: Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne* (Munich, 2001); Birgit Schneider, *Textiles*

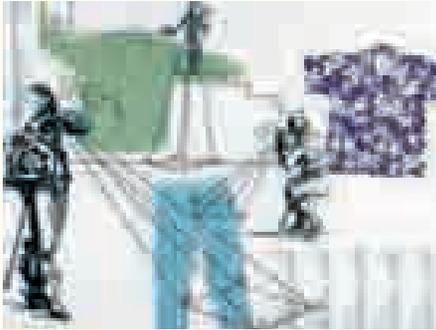


Fig. 6 Sigmar Polke, *Das Vermessen der Kleider*, 1994, textiles and acrylic on canvas, 230 × 300 cm, Städtische Galerie Karlsruhe, Garnatz Collection

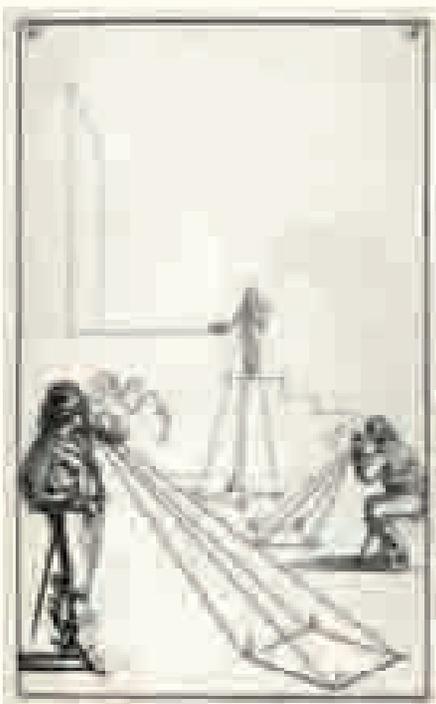


Fig. 7 Illustration from: Abraham Bosse, *Manière universelle de Mr. Desargues pour pratiquer la perspective par petit pied comme le géometral: ensemble les places et proportions des fortes & foibles touches, teintes ou couleurs* (Paris, 1647), plate 2

Prozessieren: Eine Mediengeschichte der Lochkartenweberei (Zurich and Berlin, 2007).

- 13 Karin Leonhard and Robert Felfe, *Lochmuster und Linienspiel: Überlegungen zur Druckgrafik des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Freiburg im Breisgau and Berlin, 2006), pp. 67–108.
- 14 Abraham Bosse, *Manière universelle de Mr. Desargues pour pratiquer la perspective par petit pied comme le géometral* (Paris, 1647).
- 15 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses ou perspectives curieuses* (Paris, 1955), p. 46, fig. 14, p. 6: “La perspective n’apparaît plus comme une science de la réalité. C’est une technique des hallucinations”; see also Gustav René Hocke, *Die Welt als Labyrinth: Manier und Manie in der europäischen Kunst; Beiträge zur Ikonographie und Formgeschichte der europäischen Kunst von 1520 bis 1650 und in der Gegenwart* (Reinbek, 1957).
- 16 Albrecht Dürer, *Underweysung der Messung, mit dem Zirckel und Richtscheit, in Linien, Ebenen unnd gantzen corporen* (Nuremberg, 1525).
- 17 Julia Gelschorn, *Aneignung und Wiederholung: Bildiskurse im Werk von Gerhard Richter und Sigmar Polke* (Paderborn, 2012).

nation.” With this, he contributed to the Surrealist conception of an early Post-modernism, understood as a continuing Mannerism and Baroque. Anamorphosis is an eccentric central perspective, which, when observed frontally, above all presents the material support of the image; when regarded from the correct, yet odd point of view, it teaches the viewer about the true *Weltanschauung*. Polke’s work can be seen as an anamorphosis pressed flat in which the frontal view of things, the picture’s materiality, is the correct one, while the perspectival view leads nowhere.¹⁵

With the title of his work, Polke makes reference to Albrecht Dürer’s *Underweysung der Messung* (*Four Books on Measurement*) of 1525, in whose appendix two perspective techniques with apparatuses are operated (figs. 5 a+b) with comparable scientific earnestness: the one consists in painting on a transparent sheet of glass, the other of transferring the foreshortened subject by means of a thread that is pulled through an open frame. While the first technique, which is hardly practicable, makes the object become simultaneously visible and invisible on the sheet of glass, the second, more complex, tactile technique could even be performed by two blind men. The optical measuring conducted by the perspective experimenter thus becomes an act of surveying, the blind hubris of an art made scientific.¹⁶

Dürer and Bosse both refer to Alberti’s treatise on perspective from the fourteenth-thirties, in which, for the first time, perspective is defined as a section through the pyramid of vision, described as an open window, and represented with the help of a semitransparent veil (*velum*) with a raster of darker threads for transferring the visible onto a squared sheet. In many of Polke’s works, such as, for example, *Seeing Things as They Are* of 1992, a polyester material saturated with resin lets the wooden frame behind it shine through while the view is simultaneously obstructed by printed fabric and painted motifs, in this case a dilettantish perspectival drawing and the sprayed title of the work itself. With such didactic and programmatic works, Polke exposes the window paradigm and the *velum* as an aesthetic and technical construct, a white lie of painting whose myths capitulate before the simple presence of the material, the cloth, the pattern, and the text.¹⁷

In *Measuring Clothes*, the cheaply striped summer attire that spoofs Daniel Buren’s stripes, along with the printed cloth and in combination with the dematerialized perspective experimenter, point to the fact that figure and ground coalesce in the textile medium. Like the Baroque figures that seem to pull the lines of sight out of the canvas like loose threads, our attention is directed to the tactile and textile materiality of the image, which no longer promises any scientific enchantment but rather opacity instead of transparency. Perspectival sight, gauging the world with geometrical lines of sight though the picture plane, is thus turned into the measuring of the cloths that are pasted onto the canvas. With this, Polke propagates a seeing-of-things as they are, one-to-one, and an anti-metaphysical conception of painting that is not different from printed fabric. While perspective empties the pictorial space and the living world, the material collage stacks up signification. The textile image thus reflects on its layers of meaning.