

THE 'MILLEFIORI' TAPESTRY OF PISTOIA



THE ‘MILLEFIORI’ TAPESTRY OF PISTOIA

edited by Paolo Peri

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Funded entirely by



Production

Gli Ori, Pistoia

Layout and editing

Gli Ori Redazione

Equipment and Printing

Baroni e Gori, Prato

Photo credits

Photos of “Millefleurs” tapestry of Pistoia

by Mario Quattrone

Aurelio Amendola p. 126

Alessandro Andreini p. 129 (behind the scenes photo)

Giuseppe Marraccini p. 14-15

ISBN 978- 88-7336-618-8

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Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Pistoia e Pescia
published by Gli Ori, Pistoia

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Revised edition of *L’Arazzo ‘Millefiori’ di Pistoia*,
Pistoia, Gli Ori, 2002

The ‘millefleurs’ tapestry takes the breath away. Looking at it one is enchanted, such is its beauty, the life animating it, the lush splendour of the flowers, the wood and the field in which the gaze loses itself, with the throng of animals in the background and the soaring birds high up in the sky. It is a glorious part of Pistoia’s legacy but, first and foremost, of its magnificent cathedral. This tapestry is a rare jewel, that joins others which the faith of a people, the sensibility of bishops and the safekeeping of priests have helped to conserve through to the present day.

Used for a number of centuries during particularly significant liturgical occasions, after which it remained almost unobserved for years as the backdrop to the altar of San Jacopo, the ‘millefleurs’ tapestry, following restoration in 2001 and its positioning in one of the rooms of the chapter house, has now – thanks to an agreement between the Cassa di Risparmio di Pistoia e della Lucchesia, the Cathedral and the Diocese, and with the consent of the Holy See itself – found a new home in the Antico Palazzo dei Vescovi. It may be, and there are a number of reasons for thinking so, that its Pistoian history began precisely there.

It can thus remain on public display, in a place suited to bringing out the full magnificence of its decorative details, the unquestionably fascinating representation of plants and animals that deserve careful and patient observation.

This late Gothic tapestry, known as the tapestry of the Adoration, used to be laid out in front of the main altar on Good Friday, and the Crucified Christ was placed on it to be venerated. In this way Christ appeared to be already in the *hortus conclusus* of medieval tradition, symbolizing Heaven.

Whether it was conceived as an allegory of marriage or of redemption, its prolonged use for the Adoration of the Cross shows that the nature represented on the tapestry, which is as earthly as could be imagined, is rendered sublime and ties in directly with the variety and perfection of the Creation. The animals and plants, though depicted with great naturalism, carry the observer out of time and space, and precisely for this reason, by laying itself open to the ineffable, it has been considered particularly appropriate for such a specific use.

One can only be happy about what is happening now. The idea came about when Pistoia had not yet been proclaimed Culture Capital for 2017. We can say that it anticipates that event, and it does so in the best possible way, almost naming Pistoia as the city of the ‘millefleurs’, the city of a thousand flowers.

Fausto Tardelli

Bishop of Pistoia

That day in 2002 was a great occasion, when we presented the ‘millefleurs’ tapestry, known also as the tapestry “of the Adoration”, to the people of Pistoia, together with a book recounting its history and its great artistic and symbolic value. It is this volume that is now being reprinted, to accompany another festive event.

The occasion of the present re-edition is the moving of this fabulous artefact from the cathedral space where it was housed after having been put on public display following its restoration to the more prestigious room of the Antico Palazzo dei Vescovi. Here, thanks to the passion and determination of the president of the Cassa di Risparmio di Pistoia e della Lucchesia, Alessio Colomeiciuc, a full-blown museum has been set up, larger and richer than the one which, since the inauguration of the restored palace, has surprised and satisfied visitors to the ground floor and basement areas.

From now on they will be able to visit the Palazzo dei Vescovi, now almost entirely free from company use, and climb the various floors to reach the large hall where the tapestry has been placed.

Pistoia is a city of hidden art treasures, and this wonderful piece of workmanship and of figurative and chromatic beauty is a magnificent example.

All that remains for me to do is to voice my fullest appreciation for the initiative, to thank everyone who has contributed to realizing it, and to express the hope that such an important and unusual work of art will now be more approachable for Pistoians and visitors alike.

Ivano Paci

President, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio

di Pistoia e Pescia

The idea of exhibiting the large ‘millefleurs’ tapestry belonging to the Chapter of Pistoia Cathedral for the last five centuries in one of the most beautiful rooms in Palazzo dei Vescovi took shape in spring 2013.

Around that time, Cristina Tuci, the leading expert on the history and treasures of the Museo del Palazzo, was thinking about how to make the museum’s extraordinary art works better known: the prospect of housing the famous and mysterious 16th-century artefact in the museum aroused both enthusiasm but also concern. How could the diocese and the Cathedral Chapter be persuaded to grant use of the tapestry, even on a temporary basis? And where could the resources be found to meet the cost of moving it?

Initial and unreserved support for the idea came from Gianfranco Mandorli, Tommasina Caselli and Claudio Rosati, prominent civic figures who have always, for different reasons, been every attentive to the affairs of the palace.

But the project could not have become reality without the subsequent and decisive support offered by Cristina Masdea and Valerio Tesi (Monuments, Fine Arts and Landscape Office), the Fondazione CAR-IPT (and its president Ivano Paci), the Cathedral Chapter (in the persons of Don Mario Leporatti, Don Romano Lotti and Don Luca Carlesi) and Monsignor Fausto Tardelli, who became the bishop of Pistoia in December 2014 and to whom merit must go for having immediately grasped the value of the project and its potential and positive impact for the community.

It was this unusual and significant convergence of opinion which finally induced the entire executive board and management of the Cassa di Risparmio di Pistoia e della Lucchesia, with the vital assent of the IntesaSanpaolo management, to set in motion the work to rehouse the tapestry in the large room on the second floor of the Palazzo dei Vescovi, which for over thirty years had been used for meetings of the bank’s governing bodies.

As of the spring of 2016, we can finally appreciate the outcome of this prolonged and fruitful collaboration between institutional bodies.

In its new location, the ‘millefleurs’ tapestry seems surprisingly to have “returned home”, revealing its full splendour to visitors of every provenance, condition and age, who can admire its extraordinary weave, appreciate its intriguing and complex composition and interpret its multiple symbolic images.

At the same time the precious hanging stands as a reassuring sign of a period of significant “rebirth” in Pistoian society, hopefully not ephemeral, sealed by Pistoia’s recent designation as Italy’s Capital of Culture for 2017, and by the city’s renewed ambition to become an attractive “star” in the firmament of Tuscany’s art cities.

Alessio Colomeiciuc

President, Cassa di Risparmio di Pistoia e della Lucchesia

The present volume is being brought out in a fresh edition on the occasion of the new display set-up of the ‘millefleurs’ tapestry “of the Adoration” in the Antico Palazzo dei Vescovi. The first edition, edited by Paolo Peri, was published in 2002, to attest to the restoration of the precious hanging, carried out, under the supervision of the Monuments and Fine Arts Office and of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, by Carla Molin Pradel, and to bring together the first body of critical studies devoted to it in a single volume. Promoted at the time by the Friends of the Museums and Cultural Legacy, the initiative was entirely financed by the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Pistoia e Pescia.

Following restoration, the tapestry was placed in a room adjoining the cathedral sacristy, a location which, though it satisfied the necessary conservation criteria, did mean that it was not fully accessible to the general public.

The circumstances that have made possible the new display of the ‘millefleurs’ inside the bishop’s palace are of the kind that succeed in activating complex and ungraspable alchemies, rewarding vision, courage and the ability to share in a project.

Since I was appointed by the Cassa di Risparmio to run the Museo dell’ Antico Palazzo dei Vescovi, I have been literally gripped by the fascination, beauty and extraordinary potential of this place, and have tried to look after it with loving care (and few resources) as a precious treasure trove of the memories of the city, of its layers of identity and of some of its genuine artistic masterpieces.

For this reason I sought to enrich the collections with new and prestigious works. A number of important interlocutors emerged in relation to this, above all Monsignor Fausto Tardelli, the bishop, and Don Luca Carlesi, the cathedral provost, who agreed to the transfer of the ‘millefleurs’ tapestry to premises which, besides guaranteeing its correct conservation, would also lend it due value. The project was supported by the functionaries of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Landscape Office, Maria Cristina Masdea and Valerio Tesi, who, with great intelligence and sensitivity, provided assistance every step of the way, regularly discussing possible exhibition solutions with the museum management and with staff from the Opera Laboratori Fiorentini, who realized the project.

The hanging now occupies the whole wall of a large room in the bishop’s palace. Its position offers ideal viewing conditions, effectively constituting a kind of scenic conclusion to a tour of the collections.

The room, formerly used for meetings of the bank’s executive board, has large windows overlooking Piazza del Duomo, visually suggesting and highlighting the ideal but also the economic, cultural and theological interaction between the city’s monuments and the interior of the palace, with its spaces and masterpieces.

It is the history of Pistoia and its community, then, that comes to life in the guided path around the museum.

From now on this splendid hanging can contribute, with its fantastic figures, to the story we tell, offering us, through the complex structure that is highlighted by the essays in this book, various themes to share with adults and children alike. It also enables us to knit together the symbolic, mythical and theological content that underpins a masterpiece like this.

Among the various critical contributions, it gives me pleasure to mention the essay of Maria Grazia Ciar-di Duprè, the professor who supervised my degree dissertation and whose fundamental teachings I have always tried to take inspiration from in my working life. One of them, which I have adopted as a tenet, is her rigorous call never to regard as “minor” those forms of artistic expression which many people, with ill-concealed critical snobbery, still tend to relegate to the realm of the decorative arts.

Finally, in addition to the prominent figures referred to above, I would like to thank all my colleagues who, with conscious pride, have contributed with their work to this genuinely concerted undertaking.

Cristina Tuci

Director, Museo dell’Antico Palazzo dei Vescovi



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