



Dido Showing Aeneas Her Plans for Carthage, c. 1630–35
Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (Italian, 1610–1662)
Gouache and black chalk on paper, laid down on linen
110-1/8 x 192-3/8 in. (279.7 x 488.6 cm)

In Europe between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was no more impressive display of wealth and grandeur in private homes than **tapestries**. Monumental masterpieces woven from wool and silk and often including costly silver or gold threads, **tapestries** were more expensive and time-consuming to make than any other common wall decorations of the time. In castles and châteaux, **tapestries** also provided insulation and warmth, and they were convenient for princes and dukes with several homes, since they could be rolled up and transported from castle to castle. The private chambers and reception rooms of the greater kings and nobles were always hung with **tapestries**, and even the plainest of rooms could be transformed by the addition of one of these intricate, large-scale textiles.

Tapestry weavers relied on preparatory **cartoons**, or large paintings made on paper, for their designs. The **cartoons** would serve as templates, indicating colors and designs for the weavers. Whereas some **tapestries** were custom-made, most were purchased from pre-existing **cartoons** that could be reused for multiple **editions** of **tapestries**. Very few complete **Renaissance cartoons** exist today, so the six **cartoons** in the exhibition *Once Upon a Tapestry* are exceptional. These **cartoons** are from a set of eight painted by Giovanni Francesco Romanelli, who was known for his bright colors, expressive figures, and clarity of detail. Between 1637 and the 1650s he produced many **cartoons** for the **tapestry** workshops in Rome and beyond. The Norton Simon's Romanelli **cartoons** (c. 1630–35) depict stories from Virgil's tale of Dido and Aeneas from the *Aeneid*. Several sets of **tapestries** based on the same **cartoons** survive and can be found in collections around the world.

Other **tapestries** in *Once Upon a Tapestry* include a set of four scenes from the life of **Helen of Troy**, made around 1500. The survival of the *Helen* and *Dido and Aeneas* series reveal the **Renaissance** fascination with both the **Trojan War** and the *Aeneid*, ancient stories revived in European literature, plays, and operas from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries.

***Arrival of Paris and Helen at the Court of Priam,
King of Troy, c. 1500***

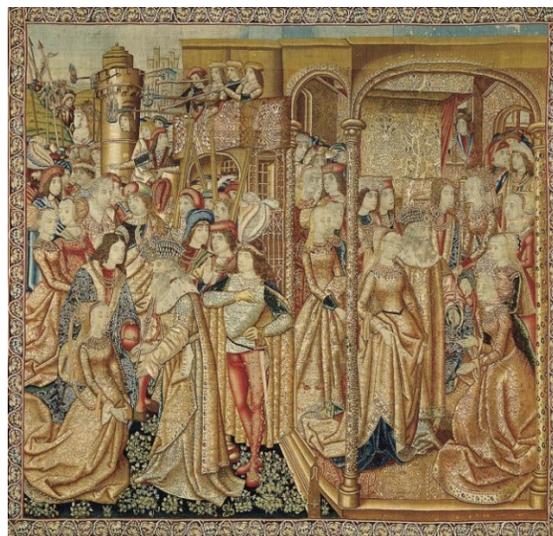
Flanders

Wool and silk tapestry

152 x 164 in. (386.1 x 416.6 cm)

Modernizing Troy

The **Trojan War** was one of the most important events in Greek mythology, lasting over ten years and resulting in the destruction of Troy by the Greeks. Legends of the **Trojan War** were very popular in both **Medieval** and **Renaissance** art, but **Renaissance** artists drew from later retellings rather than ancient sources like Homer's *Iliad*. In the twelfth century, Benoit de Sainte-Maure updated this ancient epic and set it in a **Medieval** context in *Le Roman de Troie* (The Romance of Troy).



Instead of warriors and gods, Sainte-Maure's characters were chivalrous knights, reminiscent of those in his own time, and most **Medieval** and **Renaissance** audiences knew the story of the **Trojan War** from his poem rather than the original sources. This **tapestry** draws from Sainte-Maure's retelling. The **composition** is completely filled to the edges with information about the narrative and such fifteenth-century details as the feathered hat and bead-embroidered leggings of the young aristocrat in the center foreground.

Key Concepts

- In Book III of the *Iliad* Homer writes that **Helen** began to weave the story of the **Trojan War** as it was happening. **Tapestries** about the **Trojan War** were extremely popular during the **Renaissance**. Many royal families claimed to have descended from the Trojans, associating themselves with a heroic lineage and following the example of Rome's descent from the Trojan hero **Aeneas**, as told in the *Aeneid*.
- The rise of **tapestry** was due in part to the increasing luxury of European courts at this time. Subject matter like the arrival of **Paris** and **Helen** in Troy offered an opportunity to celebrate the pageantry of royal processions and the luxuries of courtly life.
- This **tapestry** focuses on episodes from the life of **Helen of Troy** rather than the war itself. Here we see several scenes from the arrival of **Paris** and **Helen** in Troy in a **continuous narrative** beginning at the upper left and ending at the lower right of the **composition**. **Helen**, **Priam** and **Paris** each appear twice in the **tapestry**, always wearing the same clothing in order to make them recognizable and to indicate that all of the action depicted occurred on the same day.

A Closer Look at *Arrival of Paris and Helen at the Court of Priam, King of Troy*

- On the left side of the **tapestry**, throngs of welcoming noblemen and -women line the road from the gates of the city to the palace. Trumpeters on the palace balcony announce the couple's approach, and a **tapestry** hanging from that balcony shows how a **tapestry** from the period might have been displayed. **Tapestries** would have been hung outside the royal palace for only the greatest of court ceremonies and occasions, such as the entry of royalty into the city.

- At the bottom left of the **tapestry**, **Helen** kneels before King **Priam**, who has a long white beard and a flared crown. **Paris**, recognizable by his curly brown locks and the three gold chains around his neck, presents his bride-to-be.
- The narrative proceeds to the right where, inside the palace, **Priam** introduces **Helen** to the ladies of the court. Jewel-encrusted columns define the luxurious interior. **Paris's** mother, Hecuba—identified by her crown inlaid with jewels—leans forward to embrace her son.

Discussion Questions

- How does the artist create a sense of the passage of time and movement through space to show the progress of the story in a **continuous narrative**?
- **Paris**, **Helen**, and **Priam** are each depicted twice in the **tapestry**. Describe the details that make them recognizable (such as their costumes and their hair).

Activity

- Update the story of Troy to your own time and culture. What is the modern equivalent of a palace? A prince? How would **Paris** and **Helen** arrive in Southern California? What would they wear? Draw a picture of the **Trojan War** scenes depicted in this **tapestry** as if they were taking place today in your hometown.

Vocabulary

- **Composition:** the overall arrangement of the parts and elements of an artwork
- **Continuous narrative:** the depiction of multiple scenes of a story within a single frame
- **Helen of Troy:** wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta. Said to have been the most beautiful woman in the world, she was abducted by Paris and married him upon her arrival in Troy. Her abduction is considered one of the main reasons for the Trojan War.
- **Medieval:** relating to the Middle Ages, which lasted from about 500 to 1500 CE.
- **Paris:** son of King Priam of Troy. His abduction of Helen was one of the primary causes of the Trojan War.
- **Priam:** King of Troy during the Trojan War
- **Renaissance:** This cultural and artistic movement to revive classical art and literature spanned from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, beginning in Italy and then spreading to the rest of Europe.
- **Tapestry:** a thick textile in which colored weft threads are woven into fixed, undyed warp threads to form an image. For further embellishment, silk and thin strips of parchment with gold and silver leaf were sometimes used in the weft.
- **Trojan War:** the great mythological war fought between the Greeks and the Trojans, resulting in the destruction of Troy.

Aeneas Leaving Dido, c. 1630–35
Giovanni Francesco Romanelli
(Italian, 1610–1662)
Gouache and black chalk on paper,
laid down on linen
109-5/8 x 138-1/2 in. (278.4 x 351.8 cm)



A Woman's Perspective

Virgil's *Aeneid* was very popular in the seventeenth century. This epic poem follows the story of **Aeneas**, a Trojan hero who escapes the Trojan War to found the city of Rome. In the midst of his journey to Rome, he lands in Carthage, the city founded and ruled by Queen **Dido**. The love story and heartbreak that follows have inspired artists and poets for centuries. At the point in the story depicted in this **cartoon**, **Aeneas** has received orders from **Jove** to abandon **Dido** in Carthage and continue on his mission to found Rome. Fearing the wrath of **Jove** if he delays, **Aeneas** orders his three commanders to prepare his fleet for immediate departure, as can be seen on the right. Here, **Dido** confronts her lover **Aeneas** as he prepares to leave her.

Key Concepts

- In Romanelli's cartoons, the story of Dido and Aeneas is told from Dido's point of view and focuses explicitly on her reactions to his overtures and his betrayal. Most art and literature of the seventeenth century featured stories told from the male perspective, so Romanelli's choice to focus on Dido is noteworthy. In this scene, her emotional state is revealed through the handkerchief she uses to wipe away her tears.
- A **cartoon** is a full-size preparatory design for a large-scale artwork like a tapestry. Romanelli would have created small-scale sketches in which he worked out the basic design and experimented with compositions before starting on the **cartoon** itself.
- Because they are made of paper, cartoons are very vulnerable to deterioration and damage, so few survive today. This cartoon belongs to a set of eight cartoons by Romanelli depicting the story of Dido and Aeneas. Remarkably, the Norton Simon owns six of these cartoons. The whereabouts of the other two are unknown.

A Closer Look at *Aeneas Leaving Dido*

- Constructing **cartoons** of this size presented a considerable technical challenge. Each **cartoon** is made up of many small square sheets of paper stuck together with a flour-and-water paste. The resulting patchwork of papers would have been hung vertically for painting.
- Confronted by Dido, Aeneas points to his fleet and admits his intention to leave, as ordered by Jove. Although his posture appears resolved, his expression betrays his sorrow at leaving Dido.
- On the left side of the cartoon, two handmaidens watch the interaction between Dido and Aeneas unfold. After this scene, they will carry Dido away when she faints from grief.

Discussion Questions

- Although this composition is not a continuous narrative, it does contain signs of the action that comes before and after this moment in the story. What references to the rest of the story does Romanelli include (such as the handmaidens and the ships preparing for departure)?
- How does Romanelli create a sense of action and drama in the poses and expressions of the figures?

Activity

- Both **Dido** and **Aeneas** wear beautiful clothing—a gown and cape for **Dido** and a suit of armor and a cape for **Aeneas**. Redesign their outfits, clothing them in contemporary styles that you think would be appropriate for people of their status.

Vocabulary

- **Aeneas:** son of the goddess Aphrodite, a Trojan hero and refugee from the Trojan War, instructed by the gods to leave Troy and found the city of Rome.
- ***Aeneid*:** This epic poem written in Latin by Virgil, probably between 19 and 29 BCE, explores the legendary story of Aeneas on his journey to found Rome.
- **Cartoon:** a full-size preparatory design for an artwork in another medium. Cartoons were used in the creation of frescoes, other large-scale wall paintings, and tapestries. Cartoons were not physically a part of the completed tapestry, and they could be reused multiple times to make duplicate tapestries.
- **Dido: Founder and queen of Carthage**
- **Jove: King of the gods in Roman mythology**



The Death of Dido, c. 1630–35
 Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (Italian, 1610–1662)
 Gouache and black chalk on paper, laid down on linen
 109-3/8 x 164-1/2 in. (277.8 x 417.8 cm)



Death of Dido, c. 1620–40
 After Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (Italian, 1610–1662)
 Wool and silk tapestry (woven by Michel Wauters after Romanelli
 cartoon)
 158-1/2 x 224-3/4 in. (402.6 x 570.9 cm)

Romance and Tragedy

As told in Book IV of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Dido, distraught by Aeneas’s unexpected departure, orders the erection of a pyre in order to burn the armor and gifts he has left behind, hoping that he will see the flames from the sea and take it as an evil omen. This action leads Dido’s sister and ladies-in-waiting to believe that she is destroying the memory of Aeneas and letting go of the relationship. But, unable to bear her grief and humiliation, Dido mounts the pyre and stabs herself with Aeneas’s sword. Here, Romanelli shows Dido’s features contorted with pain and grief. This scene shows **Iris**, sent by Dido’s protector, the goddess **Juno**, and seen hovering above Dido in this scene, to cut a piece of Dido’s hair and dedicate it to the gods in order to release her soul and ensure her proper reception in **Hades**. Aeneas’s fleet can be seen vanishing in the background.

Key Concepts

- The story of Dido and Aeneas was often represented in theater and opera performances. This particular scene from the story was especially popular for reproduction on stage and in paintings and tapestries. The dramatized emotions of the female figures in this scene would have reminded viewers of actors in a play or opera, and the borders and frontal presentation of the action are like that of a stage set in a theater.
- The Norton Simon is fortunate to own both the cartoon for *Death of Dido*, c. 1620–40 and a tapestry woven from it. The Norton Simon’s cartoons are the only known surviving cartoons from an Antwerp workshop, making them extremely unique. They offer an important window into how these tapestries were designed and made.
- Tapestries are very vulnerable to light and fading. The finest tapestries would only be hung for special occasions, and today tapestries can only be hung for a few months at a time to limit their exposure to light. As a result of over-exposure, many formerly brilliant colors in tapestries have

faded to more muted tones, and only a fraction of the great Medieval and Renaissance tapestry collections have survived.

A Closer Look at *Death of Dido*

- Although the cartoon was painted by Romanelli in Italy, the tapestry was woven at the Michel Wauters studio in Antwerp. Because the cartoon was not physically part of the completed tapestry, it could be reused multiple times to make duplicate tapestries—these were known as **editions**. The Wauters/Romanelli set of *Dido* was extremely popular. Today four complete sets still survive and no fewer than thirty individual tapestries are known, from at least eight different **editions**.
- **Because of the way in which they were made**, tapestries reversed the images in the cartoons on which they were based. **Knowing this, Romanelli took care to depict the figures using their left hand when it would be expected that they would use their right (in the seventeenth century the right hand was considered the dominant hand used to point).**
- This tapestry has a decorative border that was probably added to the design by the weavers rather than Romanelli. The **crest**—a design featuring the initials of both the husband and wife—of the family who commissioned this tapestry is featured in the top border of the tapestry.

Discussion Questions

- Can you think of some examples of stories that have remained popular over time and have been represented in various forms, like books, movies, plays, and art? Why are certain stories, like that of Dido and Aeneas, so enduringly popular?
- What differences do you see between Romanelli's cartoon and the resulting tapestry?

Activity

- The family who commissioned this tapestry included its **crest**—a design featuring the initials of both the husband and wife—on the top of the tapestry. What would your family's **crest** look like? You can include your family's initials or draw a picture of something that represents your family.

Vocabulary

- **Edition:** a full set of tapestries woven from a single set of cartoons. The number of editions varied based on demand for the subject matter shown in the tapestry—there was not a standard number of editions created from a set of cartoons.
- **Family crest:** a shield or coat of arms with symbols that represent the family
- **Hades:** the god of the dead and the name of the underworld in Greek mythology
- **Iris:** goddess of sea and sky and messenger of the gods
- **Juno:** a Roman goddess; wife of Jove and protector of marriage