

# S P H I N X F I N E A R T



## **The Demidov Tapestry, Attributed to Charles Poerson (Vic-sur-Seille 1609 - Paris 1667)**

### **Titus at the Massacre at Jerusalem**

weave including silver-thread, depicting a scene from Flavius Joseph's account of the Judaic Wars, with soldiers pillaging, within a wooded landscape, with pitched tents before a fortress, the borders densely woven with ribbon-tied laurel wreaths suspending various armorial trophies, alternating with blossoming garlands and frolicking hounds.

368 x 516 cm (12 ft 1 in x 16 ft 11 in)

*Titus at the Massacre at Jerusalem* depicts a highly dramatic moment in a series of eight tapestries depicting the Judaic Wars (66-70 A.D.), which appear to be based on the accounts of the Jewish historian Flavius Joseph (37-100 A.D.). The current narrative relates the events of the First Jewish-Roman War (66-73 A.D.), a major rebellion by the Jews of Judaea against the Roman Empire and the resulting siege of Jerusalem led by Emperor Vespasian (9-69 A.D.) and his son Titus (39-81 A.D.). On the left of the scene, Syrian and Arabian soldiers under Roman command are slaughtering the Jews who attempt to flee the city. They rip open their victims' stomachs to reveal the coins which some of the Jews have swallowed before surrendering to their attackers. The victims writhe in agony under the brutal attack and a pleading infant makes the scene all the more poignant. In an act of heroism, Titus on horseback with a flowing cape and crowned by a laurel wreath, rushes to the scene from the right-hand side, and commands his soldiers to stop the brutal carnage.

On stylistic grounds the tapestry is believed to have been designed by Charles Poerson. Although there are no drawings or engravings for the *The Story of Titus and Vespasian* series, the attribution is based on a comparison with other tapestry designs by the artist such as *The Story of Moses* and *The Story of Cleopatra*. Poerson is thought to have painted the modelli for the series in the early 1660s as there is mention of a Titus and Vespasian series in Brussels in 1663, which appears to have been commissioned by a group of weavers through the agency of Jean Valdor (1616-1670), an engraver and art dealer. Four tapestry workshops are recorded as having woven the series: that of Willem van Leefdael (active until 1685), Gerard Peemans (active until 1707), Geraert van der Streken (d.1677) and lastly either Jean (d.1676) or Jerome (d.1719) Le Clerc.

The Hermitage houses four tapestries woven from the series, including a version of *Titus at the Massacre at Jerusalem* which was woven by van Leefdael's workshop. Although some of the colouring is different, both works have almost identical compositions and both convey the energy of the attack and the drama of Titus' timely intervention.

The most significant differences are in the borders. Interspersed amongst the garlands of flowers and the hunting trophies, in the present work, are exotic birds and exuberant hounds. In comparison to these engrossing details, van Leefdael's border is more restrained and less diverting.

*Titus at the Massacre at Jerusalem* is a typical example of Poerson's style, which was 'inspired by the classics and antiquity'.<sup>1</sup> If we compare the present work to *Caesar Crowned by Fame*, (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) we can see that both works exhibit feature thick swirling drapery, taut muscular bodies and clear, theatrical gestures. The way in which Poerson has captured the drama of the moment is characteristic of his best work.

This magnificent tapestry once belonged in the celebrated Demidov Collection. As Simon Jarvis notes 'The name "Demidov" conjures up images of enormous wealth' and it was these riches that enabled successive generations of the family to build up one of the greatest art collections in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The most noted collectors in the family were Nikolai Demidov (1724-1789) and his son, Prince Anatole Demidov (1812-1870). The differing tastes of the family members resulted in a collection that encompassed all manner of artistic objects and styles and the collection was housed in a fourteen room museum in the Villa San Donato, in Tuscany. This museum, and Anatole's taste in particular, were much celebrated, one contemporary journal remarking 'Since this foreign nobleman has come to live in our country he has formed a gallery that promises to become one of the most remarkable of our times.'<sup>3</sup> Francis Haskell states that Anatole's collection reveals him to have been 'a man of intelligence and curiosity whose love of art was genuine and well-informed'.<sup>4</sup> When the present tapestry was sold in 1880, three further tapestries from the same set were also sold and these now reside in the Louvre, Paris.

Poerson was a pupil of Simon Vouet (1590-1649), himself a highly accomplished designer of tapestries, and spent roughly five years in his studio. Poerson adopted a number of elements of the older artist's work, such as his contrapposto figures, sense of drama and movement and the play of drapery, all of which can be identified in *Titus at the Massacre at Jerusalem*. Unfortunately many of Poerson's creations no longer survive although records state he worked on a number of important commissions with Vouet as well as independently. He received numerous commissions for religious pictures and tapestry designs from the churches and religious establishments of Paris and the surrounding region. He also contributed to projects for Anne of Austria, Queen of France (1601-1666) and her son, Louis XIV (1638-1715). Poerson's most important works were his cartoons for tapestries of the *Life of the Virgin* in Strasbourg Cathedral. His designs were to enjoy considerable success in Brussels tapestry production during the last third of the seventeenth century and were highly influential on the next generation of Brussels cartoonists.

<sup>1</sup> Delmarcel, G., *Flemish Tapestry from the 15th to the 18th Century*, (Lannoo Uitgeverij, 1999) p. 252.

<sup>2</sup> Jarvis, S., 'Count Demidov at the Wallace Collection. London' in *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 136, no. 1096 (Jul., 1994), p. 469.

<sup>3</sup> L'Artiste, 17 (1834), p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> Haskell, F., 'Anatole Demidov and the Wallace Collection' in *Anatole Demidov Prince of San Donato (1812-70)*, p.21.

### **Provenance:**

Probably Prince Anatole Demidov (1813-1870), Palazzo San Donato, Florence;  
by descent to his nephew, Prince Paul Demidov (1835-1889);  
his sale, 15 March 1880, lot 1526.  
anonymous sale; Sotheby's, New York, 2/3 December 1977, lot 184;  
anonymous sale, Sotheby's, New York, 2 March 1984, lot 346;  
anonymous sale, Christie's, New York, 2 June 1993, lot 76;

anonymous sale, Christie's, New York, 31 March 2000, lot 206;  
American Private Collection.

### **Literature:**

George Leland Hunter, *Tapestries: Their Origin, History and Renaissance* (John Lane, New York & London, 1912), p.346.

### **Artist description:**

He was a pupil of Vouet, probably being in his studio from around 1632 until 1638. Much of his work is destroyed or lost, and there are few firm dates in his oeuvre. It is, however, clear that his early work was deeply influenced by that of Vouet. He adopted the contrapposto figures of the latter, his sense of movement, play of hands and draperies, and the dynamic quality characteristic of his compositions.

Indeed, Poërsen seems sometimes to have exaggerated these qualities, as in the crowded composition *St Peter Preaching in Jerusalem* (Paris, Notre-Dame; sketch or replica, Los Angeles, CA, Co. Mus. A.). This signed and dated work was the *May of Notre-Dame* (the picture commissioned annually by the Paris Goldsmiths' Corporation for the Cathedral) in 1642, and the prestigious commission indicates the position that the young artist had already attained. In 1653 he executed another *May*, *St Paul in Malta* (untraced).

It is known that in the 1630s Charles Poërsen assisted Vouet on the decoration of the *Galerie des Hommes Illustres* (destr.) in the Palais Cardinal (now Palais Royal), Paris, and that in the 1650s he collaborated on Eustache Le Sueur's décor for Anne of Austria's *Salle de Bains* (destr.) at the Palais du Louvre. In addition, he painted scenes from the *Life of the Virgin* (untraced) for Anne of Austria's chapel at the Palais Royal and, according to Sauval, undertook a decorative scheme (destr.) at the Hôtel Amelot de Bisseul, Paris. He received numerous commissions for religious pictures from the churches and religious houses of Paris and the surrounding region, among them a series on the *Life of St Louis* (ex-Lyon Cathedral, c. 1820) for the Hôpital des Quinze-Vingt, Paris.

One of Poërsen's most important commissions was for cartoons for tapestries on the theme of the *Life of the Virgin*. The tapestries (Strasbourg Cathedral) were woven between 1638 and 1657. Three of the compositions are attributable to Philippe de Champaigne and Jacques Stella, but the scenes for which paintings are preserved in the Musée des Beaux-Arts at Arras all seem to be by Poërsen. These works show his ability, learnt from Vouet, to handle large-scale compositions and to set his figures within vast spaces articulated with architecture. A study for a *Pietà* (England, priv. col., see *French Oil Sketches from an English Collection*, exh. cat., Houston, TX, Mus. F.A., 1973–5, no. 71) also shows a debt to Vouet but reveals the intense and sensitive side of Poërsen's artistic personality. Two paintings in the manner of Vouet illustrating scenes from the *Life of Cincinnatus* (Le Mans, Mus. Tessé) have been attributed to Poërsen on the basis of an inventory of the Revolutionary period (1789–95). It is, however, difficult to believe that Poërsen, whose figures are recognizably heavier and more rounded than those of Vouet, and whose compositions have a greater accumulation of details, could have painted pictures that are quite so close to his former master's style.

In fact, Poërsen was subject to influences other than Vouet's, and his work displays evidence of increasingly rigorous experiments in classicism: lucid and balanced compositions, clearly defined profiles and rhythmical gestures, as in the *Nativity* (Paris, Louvre), the *Pietà* (St-Germain-sur-Ille, nr Rennes, private chapel) and the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Mus.). Other paintings, such as the *Rape of the Sabine Women* (Paris, Mus. Hébert) and the *Judgement of Solomon* (Vire, Mus. Mun.), indicate a knowledge of 17th-century Bolognese painting, as well as links with the art of Sébastien Bourdon and the Corneille family. He is also known to have collaborated with Daniel Hallé on a temporary triumphal arch for Louis XIV in 1660. Poërsen's known oeuvre is being expanded by the attribution to him of previously anonymous or miscatalogued works. There are collections of drawings by him in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, and the Albertina, Vienna, and many untraced compositions are preserved in contemporary engravings by, among others, Guillaume Chasteau and Charles Simmoneau. In 1651 Poërsen entered the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, Paris, of which he became rector seven years later.