

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)

Provenance: Probably Prince Anatole Demidov, 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.

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



Workshop of Jean or Hieronymus Le Clerc, *Caesar Crowned by Fame*, after the design by Charles Poerson, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Figure 1)



William van Leefdael, *Titus at the Massacre at Jerusalem*, after the design by Charles Poerson, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 2)

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 (fig. 2). 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'.¹ If we compare the present work to *Caesar Crowned by Fame*, see figure 1, 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 Jervis 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.² 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.'³ 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'.⁴ 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.

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

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

³ *L'Artiste*, 1/7 (1834), p. 72.

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



