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The Gun Show

Art & War in the Renaissance: The Battle of Pavia Tapestries (exh. cat. Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums; Houston, Museum of Fine Arts), ed. by Carmine Romano

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Reviewed by Carolyn Yerkes

A legend surrounds a pair of tapestries depicting scenes from the life of Clovis that hangs in the Palais du Tau in Reims.¹ The tapestries were abandoned by Charles V, the story has it, when he left them behind in his tent during the ignominious retreat from the siege of Metz in January 1553. Forsaken along with hundreds of imperial soldiers who lay wounded on the frozen fields of Lorraine, the tapestries were found by the heroic garrison that had held the city. Reims, home of the cathedral where Clovis was baptized and thus the site of royal coronations, received them as a war trophy. Nearly a century earlier, tapestries of Clovis had hung in the banqueting hall when Charles the Bold married Margaret of York—a union the French hated—and now these very artworks were in French hands. The siege of Metz broke Charles, who retired to Yuste only a

few years after giving up his attempt to reclaim the city for his empire. Nothing symbolized his abject defeat so well as the restoration of tapestries celebrating French monarchical might to the place where French kings were crowned.

Though it forms a perfect circle, the legend of the Clovis tapestries changing hands on the battlefield has little basis in fact. Francis Salet put paid to the story when he pointed out its historical impossibility.² Charles, sick with gout, took months to reach Metz, where he visited his troops only briefly. In the unlikely event that his retinue had dragged enormous tapestries along on the journey, the nearby castle—not tent—where he stayed was never looted by French soldiers. Nonetheless, even a story without evidentiary support can still touch upon a truth. Tapestry is a vehicle for epic, coalescing around those grand subjects capable of sustaining its scale: myths, hunts, conquests. An epic story about tapestry is created from our expectations for the medium and fits our perceptions of the Holy Roman Emperor who lived his life at war.³

Charles V never owned the Clovis panels at Reims, but he is associated with one of the most magnificent tapestry series of the Renaissance. The series extends a battle fought in a single day across seven panels. Its subject, the Battle of Pavia, came at the outset of Charles's military career. The imperial army emerged victorious from Pavia on 24 February 1525, retaining the Duchy of Milan for the Habsburgs and capturing François I himself in the process. Designed by Bernard van Orley and woven in the workshop of Jan and Willem Dermoyen in Brussels, the tapestries celebrating Charles's first major triumph

Corresponding author:

Carolyn Yerkes, Princeton University, Princeton, USA
email: yerkes@princeton.edu

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were commissioned by the States General of the Netherlands and presented to him as a gift in 1531. They are now owned by the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, which recently conserved them and made them the subject of a traveling exhibition to the United States. This exhibition was complemented by the catalog *Art & War in the Renaissance: The Battle of Pavia Tapestries*, edited by Carmine Romano, which presents short essays summarizing recent research on the tapestries as well as selections of sixteenth-century arms and armor from the Farnese Armory that accompanied the panels on tour.

The Pavia tapestries are so immense that the soldiers who fill their embroidered frames are larger than the viewers who gaze up at them. The analogy between their bodies and ours is felt from the first, exaggerated by the foreground figures who are posed mid-fall. Each panel measures over four meters high and eight meters wide, which is why their conservation was a momentous enterprise, as a catalog essay by Graziella Palei, "Precious Threads: The Conservation of the Battle of Pavia Tapestries," details (54–59). The tapestries' subsequent exhibition abroad offered new audiences an opportunity to confront first-hand their enormous scale, an aspect fundamental to their design and crucial to their impact as legible, situated artworks. The artist of the Pavia tapestries had specific expectations for who the audience for the tapestries would be and how those viewers would understand the work—a set of expectations worth considering when we examine the narrative about war that they present.

The Pavia tapestries parcel out a complex narrative into a series of incidents. They depict historical actors whose specific deeds are also described in contemporary accounts of the fighting. The tapestries' makers went to great lengths to make this complicated story of the day-long battle comprehensible, sewing flags, insignia, and even personal names into the scene. When tens of thousands of combatants are involved,

however, the details can be difficult to parse. Here, the *Art & War* catalog provides an elegant and eminently useful guide to the uninitiated. Its middle section, "The Battle of Pavia Tapestries" (95–123) reproduces each panel in a double-page spread, preceded by a concise summary of the scene. The synopsis of *The Surrender of King François I* (101–103, cat. no. 2), for example, provides a who's who of the nobility present at this apex moment, identifying the major figures and explaining what they are doing.

Basic identifications like these are critical, given that individual exploits drive the narrative across the panels. The selected episodes emphasize how glory accrues or dissipates through discrete actions. *The Flight of the French Rear Guard under the Duke of Alençon* (121–123, cat. no. 7) is a particularly vivid case, a depiction of the Spanish cavalry in the imperial army charging at French troops, forcing them to the banks of the Ticino River. When the French crossed to safety over a pontoon bridge, the Duke of Alençon, who was the brother-in-law of François I, ordered them to destroy the bridge behind them to prevent the imperial soldiers from following. The panel homes in on a French soldier prizing a plank with his halberd while another drops a board into the water. Within this panel, the weavers demonstrate virtuosic control of color by showing a man partially submerged in the river, the red folds of his clothes visible beneath the translucent blue waves. They convey another consequential detail in silver, picking out the duke's name on the blanket of his horse in shimmering threads. The inscription identifies the nobleman who stands in safety as his men flee in terror. Another panel, *The Sortie of the Besieged Imperial Troops from Pavia, and the Rout of the Swiss Guard* (117–119, cat. no. 6), relates the further fatal consequences of the duke's order to destroy the bridge, as Swiss mercenaries allied to the French drown when trying to cross the river.

Because these stories interlock across the panels, their original sequence is consequential.

It was long assumed that the seven scenes were meant to be presented in chronological order, and they were installed that way in Naples until Cecilia Paredes put forward a new hypothesis.⁴ She proposed that the panels instead form a single, continuous landscape, an argument that is condensed in an essay in *Art & War*, “Portraits of a Battle” (44–51). This rearrangement, used in the touring exhibition, restructures how the panels are interpreted. When viewed in this order, combat appears to occur simultaneously rather than sequentially, and the topography of the battlefield assumes greater significance.

The focus on the Pavia tapestries’ original installation underscores a broader trend in scholarship on the medium that emphasizes patronage and provenance in the interpretation of major series. Brendan Cassidy recently forged another link in the provenance chain that stretches from the Pavia tapestries’ presentation in Brussels in 1531 to their arrival in Naples in 1862.⁵ When the British diplomat and art collector John Udny purchased the panels in 1762, he soon learned that their enormous size made them exceedingly difficult to resell. Potential clients were limited to palace owners with at least one entire room of blank walls—preferably two—and a healthy respect for the Habsburgs. The scholarly trend also extends beyond the Pavia tapestries. An exhibition on view near-coevally with *Art & War* dealt with related issues, *Eternal Spring: Gardens and Tapestries in the Renaissance*, at the Museum Hof van Busleyden in Mechelen, focused on another sixteenth-century Flemish tapestry series, this one with allegorical scenes of gardens rather than historical scenes of war.⁶ The panels once belonged to Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle, a key political advisor to Charles V, who installed them in his Brussels palace. The cardinal’s prodigious art collecting in the context of his proximity to Habsburg power was a dominant theme of the show, a pastoral flip side of the *Art & War* coin.

Situatedness, however, means something more than a work’s physical setting; the con-

cept encompasses how the Pavia tapestries were embedded in a cultural context. That context factored into the artist’s intention when crafting the central narrative, while assuming its legibility. Like any monumental series, the Pavia panels were always intended for circumscribed audiences, installed in places where those with access to them already understood their message, with or without a scholarly guide. Viewers were meant to identify the protagonists and also to identify *with* them. Indeed, we know that such identifications occurred. When Admiral Coligny arrived in the *grande salle* of the Brussels Royal Palace to sign a peace treaty on behalf of Henri II of France in 1556, he was offended by the prominent display of the Pavia series there, given its depiction of the previous French king’s capture.⁷ Yet the actions of the nobility pictured in the tapestries, whether honorable or dishonorable, were not necessarily the most consequential forces driving the battle’s outcome.

To military historians, Pavia has long signified a revolution in tactics, an early major battle in which firearms proved a decisive factor in combat. At one point, imperial infantrymen armed with arquebuses, a type of long gun, were able to overcome a unit of French cavalry, a triumph of a new technology over an old. The Pavia panel *The Imperial Attack on the French Cavalry* (109–111, cat. no. 4) shows the violent clash with foreground figures brandishing arquebuses. They are only one feature of a grander theatrical story, however, in which cavalry, followed by pikemen, get consistently higher billing. For Bernard van Orley, a knight on horseback remained the obvious hero for an epic. His preparatory drawings for the tapestries, today in the Louvre, exploit the pictorial possibilities of the leaping horse juxtaposed with the posed male figure on the ground. These drawings, presented in an *Art & War* catalog essay by Emma C. de Jong, “Seven Drawings of the Battle of Pavia” (82–91) suggest that these familiar battlefield types still commanded the tapestry



1 Willem and Jan Dermoyen, after Bernard van Orley, *The Sortie of the Besieged Imperial Troops from Pavia, and the Rout of the Swiss Guard*, c. 1528 – 1531, wool, silk, gold, and silver thread, 440 × 818 cm. Naples, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte

medium even as their place on the battlefield was beginning to recede.

Though the tapestries only allude to it, the *Art & War* exhibition and catalog both address the pivotal shift in weapons tactics that occurred at Pavia. The panels went on the road with a range of objects from the Farnese Armory, also part of the Museo di Capodimonte collections, that demonstrate the types of military technologies current in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These objects, which include pieces of horse tack, helmets and a shield, and tournament armor, as well as swords, pikes, and other blade weapons, are featured in the catalog in the section “Arms and Armor from the Farnese Armory” (125 – 197), illustrated with beautiful photography though not described in individual essays or entries. The presentation emphasizes the skilled craftsmanship, especially in metalworking, that informed their manufacture, showing them off as artworks without dwelling on their specific functions.

Situatedness once again proves a factor in how we take in these objects, especially the handguns that were part of the selection. Two of the exhibition’s touring locations, Houston and Fort

Worth, are in Texas, a state where the law permits anyone over age 21 to carry a handgun, openly or concealed, usually without a permit. Because the Museum of Fine Arts and the Kimbell are exceptions, visitors to *Art & War* passed large signs reminding them that guns are not allowed inside the galleries. The exhibition included what an object label described as “the most beautiful gun in the world,” a wheellock arquebus of forged steel and wood produced in 1596 by Giovan Battista Viscontia (186 – 189, cat. no. 43). The types of prestigious weapons chosen for display in effect reproduced the very selective narrative that Orley structured in the tapestries. Yet Pavia was the starting point of an entirely different story, one in which guns became a mass weapon, capable of altering and destroying entire societies.

The presentation of the elite weapons on display in *Art & War* served as a reminder that the tapestries themselves commemorate one dimension of their complicated subject. Infantrymen bearing arquebuses do not factor prominently into the Pavia panels, and neither, for that matter, do artilleryists or trench-diggers, two other types of soldier whose relationship to another relatively new technology made a critical

difference to events. The battle of Pavia was the bloody punctuation mark at the end of a long siege, in which François I's army had encircled the city since October. Again, the tapestries gesture toward this preceding history, with hordes of camp followers—the new society that developed out of the itinerant militancy of expanding armies—depicted in one panel. *The Sortie of the Besieged Imperial Troops from Pavia, and the Rout of the Swiss Guard* (fig. 1) has the besieged city in the background and a landscape riddled with sconces, the circular defenses dug into the earth, before it. Orley used these prominent elements of the siege landscape to restage Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina*, contorting each figure in a unique way to show off his bravura handling of the clothed body rather than the nude. The composition designed for textiles reveals in the fabrics, with billowing slashed sleeves that were the fashion of the moment, and the sheen of cloths contrasted with the shine of metals. It makes sense that the siege of Pavia should be relegated to the background, given that it was the historical background to the battle that brought it to a close. The Habsburg armies were only there for the finish. The siege is left out for another important reason, too, one that becomes clearer in light of Orley's focus on the soldiers scrambling from the trenches.

Tapestry was not a medium that could adequately address the effect of the arquebus or the artillery on the battlefield, because the individuals in those roles did not provide meaningful pictorial possibilities in the forms that artists like Orley knew best. The artists and sponsors of the Pavia tapestries came from a culture that assumed a close personal relationship between a soldier and his weapon. For this reason, indi-

vidual names are sewn onto sword blades and horse bridles. In the panels, weapons have a one-to-one relationship with the person carrying them. Cannons did not work this way, which is one reason why they were assigned personalities, and even names, derived from their ornamental features or the sounds that they made. The key actors in an artillery siege were trench diggers and gunners, responsible for starving out distant, unseen enemies. There was little prestige in the act, and no opportunity for personal heroics. Where there is no valor, there is no tapestry.

Which brings us back to Metz, the siege that Charles lost because he assembled an army too vast to support. He needed to encircle the large imperial city, seized by the French, which required assembling an army that counted among the largest ever seen in the early modern world. Charles's inability to keep these soldiers warm and fed through the winter meant they never made it to spring: the logistics of siege warfare proved more lethal than combat. The French commemorated their victory in medals featuring the intact city walls of Metz and prints that mapped the defensive artillery stations that their nobles had manned. No tapestries were made of the siege of Metz itself; the medium did not work for the task. Instead, the legend of the stolen tapestries arose later in the void. What history did not supply, it had to invent.

CAROLYN YERKES is Associate Professor of Early Modern Architecture at Princeton University. Her next book, *Siegelands: Early Modern Warfare and the Monumental Print*, discusses artistic identity, place, and conflict in the northern Renaissance.

- 1 Now under renovation, the Palais du Tau, the former palace of the Archbishop of Reims, is scheduled to re-open as the Musée des Sacres this year.
- 2 Francis Salet, Les tapisseries de *L'Histoire de Clovis* de la cathédrale de Reims: Brève histoire d'une légende, in: *Art, objets d'art, collections: Etudes sur l'art du Moyen Age et de la Renaissance sur l'histoire du goût et des collections. Hommage à Hubert Landais*, Paris 1987, 70–74.
- 3 There is more than one legend about Charles traveling to war with artworks in his field tent: the emperor reportedly had a portrait of himself by Lucas Cranach the Elder at the capitulation of Wittenberg in 1547. For discussion see Steven Ozment, *The Serpent and the Lamb: Cranach, Luther, and the Making of the Reformation*, New Haven and London 2011, 256.
- 4 Cecilia Paredes, The Confusion of the Battlefield: A New Perspective on the Tapestries of Pavia (c. 1525–1531), in: *RIHA Journal* 2014, URL: <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/rihajournal/article/view/70208> (last access 23 September 2025).
- 5 Brendan Cassidy, John Udney and the *Battle of Pavia* Tapestries, 1762–74, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 167, 2025, no. 1469, 792–799.
- 6 *Eternal Spring: Gardens and Tapestries in the Renaissance* (exh. cat. Hof van Busleyden Museum, Mechelen), ed. by Carlotta Striolo, trans. by Guy Shipton, Kontich 2024.
- 7 Iain Buchanan, *Habsburg Tapestries* (Studies in Western Tapestries, vol. 4), Turnhout 2015, 126.

Photo Credit: 1 MFAH Press Release (URL: <https://www.mfah.org/press/in-march-2025-mfah-presents-knights-in-shining-armor-the-pavia-tapestries> [last access 2 October 2025]).