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Abegg Stiftung: 20 years old

Antiquity in new lustre

The Abegg Foundation in Riggisberg near Berne has enlarged and partly transformed its Museum of Applied Art, from ancient times up to the Renaissance, for its twentieth anniversary. A new and spectacular piece in the collection is a tapestry of late-antiquity which has been restored at considerable expense in the Museum's own atelier. A special show lasting until autumn illustrates the painstaking detective work and patience of the women textile restorers by means of photographs of various important pieces and, by way of example, four early medieval altar frontals.

In 1967, expatriate textile manufacturer Werner Abegg, who made his fortune in Turin and New York, built a feudal home for his old age and a museum for his collection of applied art in the idyllic countryside of the Bernese Längenberg, remote from the bustle and grime of the towns. His great love and expert knowledge of antique textiles was thenceforth devoted to their preservation, for which he equipped a fine atelier as well as a centre for study and training. Until his death in 1984, Werner Abegg maintained a lively interest in the work of his generously-endowed Foundation; the same still goes today for his widow of more than eighty years.

Textile restoration

The textile exhibitions, which change every year, attract visitors from afar. But above all it is the conservation atelier under the direction of Mechtild Flury-Lemberg which radiates an international personality -

through the teaching of, at one time, thirty women textile restorers and over one hundred practical trainees from all over the world. And through the successful restoration of important cultural documents such as, for example, the only existing book, written on lengths of textile material, by the Etruscans; of Renaissance textile findings taken from a sunken ship; or of the shroud of St. Anthony of Padua.

The difficult but exciting work of restoration is now shown in photographs. But visitors can admire, *in natura*, four altar robes - sleeveless chasubles - attributed to early medieval saints.

The restoration work on a 4th century (AD) tapestry which the Foundation purchased in 1986 for a seven-figure sum (the highest amount ever paid for a textile exhibit) was extremely delicate and costly. This 7x23-foot wall hanging, woven of wool and linen, had originally been used as a shroud and it reached the *objets d'art* trade in mysterious ways and by adventurous routes, cut up into many single parts.

Unique records

Only on a basis of accurate study of the state of conservation and discoloration was it possible to piece the fragments together into a convincing motif and thus to reconstruct the finest still-surviving tapestry of Graeco-Roman late antiquity. It depicts an eight-figure Dionysian festive procession in which the God of Wine moves along under archways with satyrs and priestesses.

Containing two other figure tapestries and

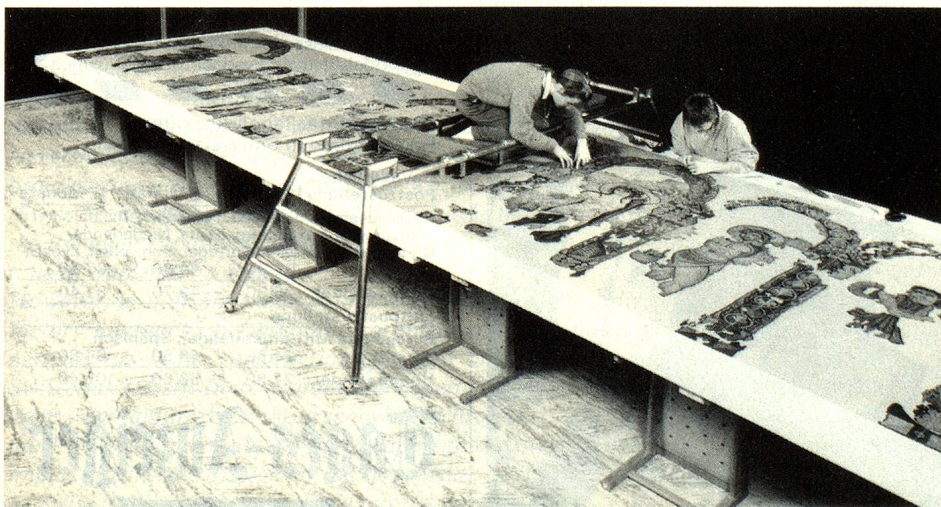


The God of Wine (Dionysus tapestry).

many smaller pieces, this newly furnished exhibition room provides a unique record of Hellenistic textile art. Another new section houses a collection of golden, colourful silk fabrics of 18th century France; they are stretched on electronically-operated sliding walls and unfold their splendour as the clothes of ladies of the court.

And there is more than enough to admire in the rest of the collection: rythons (vessels in the form of animals) and gold jewellery, antique pottery and glass from the ancient Orient, Roman statues and tops of columns, chalices and goblets, jewel caskets and reliquaries of the Middle Ages - a treasure trove of lavishly-decorated objects and precious materials. And, of course, again and again the textiles which constitute the splendour of the Abegg Foundation. The Museum is open daily from two to five p. m. until the end of October.

Anna Mathis



Restoration of the wall hanging took months (Photos: Abegg Foundation).

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