Tapestry

Place of origin: Florence (possibly, made) Ferrara (province) (possibly, made)
Date: ca. 1450-1550 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Tapestry woven in wool on linen
Museum number: 846-1884
Gallery location: Medieval and Renaissance, Room 50d, case WN, shelf EXP, box FRAMED

Public access description
This 15th-century portrait is thought to have been made by Flemish weavers, perhaps working in Italy at Ferrara. Their skills were highly regarded throughout Europe; hence the patronage afforded them by certain prestigious Italian families, such as the Este, Gonzaga and Medici. The head of the figure is in the style of the Italian artist Cosimo Tura, who from 1457 to 1480 supplied drawings and cartoons (patterns) to the Flemish tapestry weavers in Ferrara.

Tapestry portraits from this period are rare and do not necessarily represent a true likeness of the individual; rather he is identifiable through certain attributes such as what he is wearing or carrying. Here the image is of St Antoninus (Archbishop of Florence from 1446—59). His identifying attributes are the halo (a sign of his sainthood), his mitre and crozier or staff (a sign of his status as an archbishop) and his robes or habit (black and white and therefore of the Dominican order). Although Antoninus Pierozzi (Florence, 1389—1459) was not canonised until 1523, he was depicted as a saint in the 15th century. In the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the position of Archbishop is below that of Cardinal and Pope, and above that of priest and bishop.

Descriptive line
Tapestry portrait of St Antoninus, Italy (possibly Ferrara or Florence), 15th-16th century

Physical description
Tapestry-woven picture of a bishop saint, probably with a woollen weft and linen warp. The composition is executed on a deep blue ground and comprises a figure with his right hand raised in benediction and his left holding a bishop's staff or crozier (tied with a piece of rope) and a book. The figure is surrounded by a 4.5 inch 'frame' (woven into the tapestry) in which coloured fruits hang down the vertical struts. He is dressed in the attire of a bishop (ring, bejewelled mitre, alb, capacious cloak-like vestment and palium (decorated with crosses) and stands on a bed of flowers (similar to those in many mille-fleur tapestries). Most of the colours have faded but what remains suggests they were very striking, shades of red, yellow, white, blue.

There is indistinct lettering (probably marked on later) on the alb and on the crozier: Roma (?) and Michelus (?)

Dimensions
Height: 179 cm without frame, Width: 78.5 cm, Depth: 0.3 cm without frame

Museum number
846-1884

Object history note
Bought by the museum in 1884.

Historical significance: According to Wingfield Digby, this 'isolated panel of an Archbishop is unusual.

Historical context note
Wingfield Digby (1981) identified the panel as probably woven by Flemish weavers, perhaps working in Italy at Ferrara, the head of the figure being in the style of Cosimo Tura, who from 1457-80 supplied drawings and cartoons to the Flemish tapestry weavers there (for example, the Deposition, c.1475, in the Cleveland Museum, Ohio). WD also noted that there are inscriptions in the upper and lower borders (later restorations) which identify the saint. They read: MCCCCLX; Antoninus A F’ (for Archiepiscopus Florentiae).

The subject
The content of the inscription as a 'portrait' of St Antoninus is supported by the fact that the figure is wearing wearing the habit of the Dominican order (black and white), as well as the attributes of his Archbishop's status. Antoninus Pierozzi (Florence, 1389-1459) was not canonised until 1523, but was nonetheless represented as a saint in paintings from the 15th century. He had joined the Dominican Order in 1405 and thereafter lived in various of the Order's houses in Italy, for much of the time as local superior and twice as superior of a province. He founded the friary of San Marco in Florence in 1436 with the patronage of Cosimo dei Medici, the famous Fra Angelico receiving the commission for the paintings on the walls. The friary became a centre of Renaissance humanism. He was appointed Archbishop of Florence in 1446 and reputedly undertook his office with justice and charity. His first duty was always to the people of his diocese although he was called
to preside in civil and ecclesiastical affairs. His writings as a practical moralist show his awareness of the problems brought about by new social and economic developments and a desire to encourage the state to intervene in mercantile affairs for the common good, and give support to the disadvantaged. He was canonized by Pope Adrian VI whose ideas about church reform echoed Antoninus's concerns. (B. Jarret, St Antonino and Medieval Economics (1914), cited in D. Attwater. A Dictionary of Saints. Penguin, 1965, p.49). A recent article suggests 'Saint Antonino was an early economist and social scientist who addressed the need to design theories of production, value and distribution, in part because he saw the interconnectedness of individual elements. The system he discussed is more general than narrowly economic, embracing as it does meta-history, God and men. His views are notable for their generality, their optimism in the dark pages of history, and the simple notion that all good will comes from pursuing a way to Christian polity' (Alexandrin G.; Poulatis S.S. 'Social economist: St Antonino, Bishop of Florence, 1384-1459'. International Journal of Social Economics, Volume 28, Numbers 5-7, 2001, pp. 561-576.) Further reading: Raymond de Roover, St. Bernardino of Siena and St. Antonino of Florence: The Two Great Thinkers of the Middle Ages. Boston, 1967).

The identity of the saint and his local following suggest that the tapestry may have been woven in northern Italy either at the end of the 15th century after his death or after his canonisation in 1526. Evidence of tapestry-weaving in Ferrara, for example, would suggest an earlier rather than later date.

Tapestry weaving in northern Italy
The Este family, marquises of Ferrara had a long history of acquiring tapestries from Bruges by the second half of the fifteenth century; around the 1420s when a handful of French and Netherlandish weavers relocated to Ferrara from other Italian centres; initially they were involved mainly in repairing tapestries and the production of coarse furnishing tapestries, but there is evidence that some workshops were capable of producing high quality work. In Ferrara, for example, for about 20 years from 1444 Livino Gigli of Bruges worked for Leonello d'Este (1407-50) on hangings depicting pavilions, arms, and devices on a ground with animals and verdure from designs by the Ferrarese court artists Cosimo Tura (1430-95). He had set up workshops in Florence between 1455-7, and then probably moved on the Milan.

Ferrara and Mantua, under the enlightened patronage of the Este (Borso and Ercole I) and Gonzaga respectively, had flourishing native workshops in the mid to late 15th century; in the second half of the 15th century, French and Netherlandish weavers still dominated Italian workshops; but in the last 15 years of the 15th century local weaving activity seems to have diminished. (Thomas Campbell. 'Patronage and Production in Italy, 1380-1510'. In Tapestry in the Renaissance. Art and Magnificence. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale, 2002, pp. 85-102).

Presuming that this piece was woven as a hanging of this size, it is likely that it could have been used either for private devotion in the domestic setting or as an image in a chapel devoted to the cult of this particular saint.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O129998/tapestry-unknown/