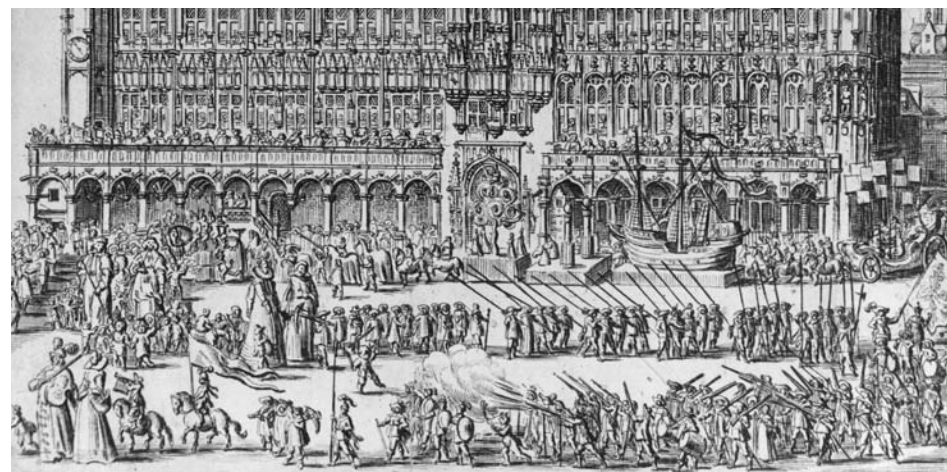


This wall tapestry is the third in a series of four wall tapestries woven in the early 16th century, commissioned by Francis of Taxis for St Ursula's chapel in the church of Notre-Dame du Sablon.

The iconography of this series of wall tapestries is extremely interesting. The tapestries depict an old Brussels legend concerning the translation in 1348 of a statue from Antwerp to the chapel of the archers in Brussels. The statue of Mary attracted a flood of pilgrims, and the chapel became too small. This was why the Gothic church of Notre-Dame du Sablon was built on this spot between the early 15th century and the mid-16th century (**Fig. 1**).

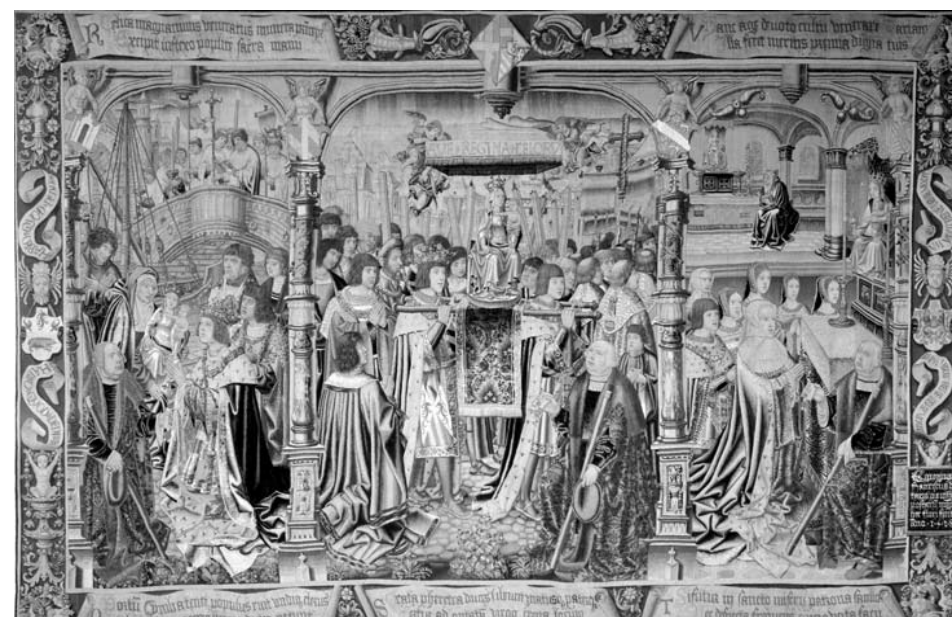


Thereafter, the translation of the statue was commemorated by an annual procession. During the reign of Charles V, this procession developed into a magnificent parade with a political dimension, during which feats of arms from history were performed. This parade is now known as the *Ommegang* and still takes place today (**Fig. 2**).

The general form of the representation still evokes the Middle Ages very strongly. The tableaux follow one another in chronological order, as in a strip cartoon. The division into three parts, which is often found in Brussels wall tapestries from the 15th century, is taken from the art of the altarpiece. Designs for wall tapestries were created by painters who also worked on the altarpieces.



1



3

2

The first wall tapestry depicts the first vision of Beatrice Soetkens: Mary asks her to go and fetch a statue from a church in Antwerp and have it cleaned and gilded, because the people of Antwerp have not been venerating it sufficiently. The second wall tapestry shows Mary appearing a second time, asking Beatrice to take the statue with her, but this is refused by Antwerp's municipal council. Mary then charges Beatrice to steal the statue. The fourth tapestry shows the arrival of the statue of Mary at the port of Brussels, in the presence of Philip the Handsome and his sons, Charles V and Ferdinand (**Fig. 3**).



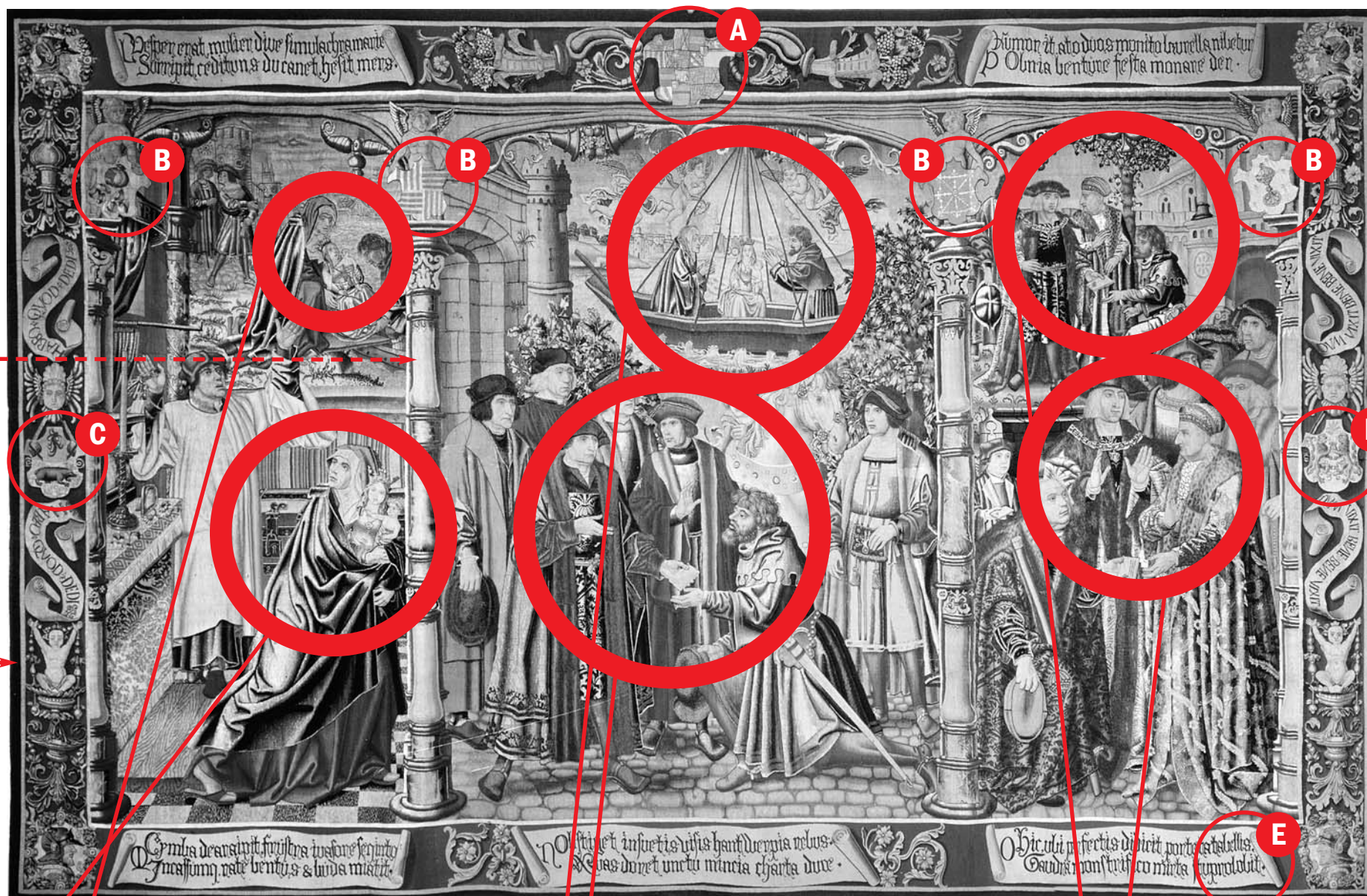
4

5

The postal service was first organised under the aegis of Frederic III and Maximilian I of Austria developed it still further. Francis of Taxis gained a monopoly for postal traffic throughout the Hapsburg Empire (**Fig. 4**). The Taxis family was to retain this monopoly for around three centuries, and this is said to be the origin of the word 'taxi'. Like St Ursula's chapel in the church of the Sablon, which was financed by Francis of Taxis, the series provided confirmation of the status of the donor. Francis of Taxis died in 1517 and never witnessed the completion of the series in 1518. The series is said to have been designed by the Brussels painter Bernard van Orley. The fact that Francis of Taxis chose this painter is not really very strange. Shortly beforehand, Bernard van Orley had worked for the court and was familiar with the technical aspects of weaving wall tapestries. In addition, he created a triptych for the church of the Sablon. Francis of Taxis certainly knew about this, as he went to live in a large residence opposite this church in Brussels after he was appointed as postmaster.

According to certain versions of the legend, this is said to be the statue of Our Lady *op 't Stocksen*, a statue that lay at the origin of the Antwerp cathedral. This does not appear to be the case, although the legend does contain some element of truth. The annals of the Dukedom of Brabant read: 'In the year 1348 Our Lady of Antwerp came to Brussels'. The legend bears witness to the rivalry between the two cities. The statue of Mary was probably destroyed in the late 16th century during the iconoclasm.

The series of wall tapestries probably hung in the church of the Sablon until the plundering during the iconoclasm in the late 16th century. It was 1874 before they reappeared, in the Paris art trade. Later on they were hung in the armoury of a mansion, and the first and third tapestries were cut up to fit (**Fig. 5**). After this, the pieces were scattered among various private and public collections. The fourth wall tapestry and a few pieces of the first wall tapestry are kept at the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels. The second wall tapestry can be found in the Ermitage Museum in St Petersburg.



The various tableaux are mounted in an architectural setting of arches supported by little pillars.

The edge is decorated with grotesque figures. The patterns point to Renaissance influences.

A
Coat of arms of Philip the Handsome or Charles of Hapsburg.

B
Coat of arms of the various estates of Charles V: Granada, Seville, Navarre and Galicia.

C
Coat of arms of Francis of Taxis.

D
Coat of arms of Tonola Magnasco, mother of Francis of Taxis.

E
Banderols bearing the Latin text telling the legend of Our Lady of the Sablon in distich (rhyming couplets).

1
Beatrice stuffs the statue she has taken under her cloak. The sexton is paralysed by a miracle and is unable to do anything to prevent the theft of the statue.

2
With the help of a shipper, Beatrice takes the statue onto a boat. Two citizens of Antwerp stand watching on the quay and witness a second miracle when the boat moves away from the quay and sails towards Brussels.

3
The boat carrying Beatrice, the shipper and the statue travels upstream along the Senne to Brussels. A group of angels indicates divine protection. The town in the background is probably Malines.

4
Meanwhile, in Antwerp, the miracle has come to the ears of the municipal council, who send a messenger to Brussels on horseback. The kneeling messenger wears the garments and carries the sword of the couriers of the Taxis postal service.

5
Upon arriving in Brussels, the messenger hands the letter to the Dukes of Brabant. Although the legend is set in the 14th century at the time of Duke John III of Brabant, the Hapsburgers Frederic III and Maximilian I of Austria are depicted here. Both princes played a role in the organisation of the postal service. Francis of Taxis wished to pay homage to his patrons in this way.

6
This tableau is a replica of the picture above it: Francis of Taxis receives a contract from Frederic III and Maximilian I of Austria for his appointment as postmaster for the entire Hapsburg Empire. The coat of arms with the two-headed eagle of the Hapsburgers can be distinguished on the letter.