

Renaissance-era tapestries at Norton Museum once belonged to Habsburg monarchs

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The eight tapestries on view at the Norton Museum undoubtedly are imposing works of art. The wall-sprawling textiles are 11 to 12 feet tall and 12 to 18 feet long. If they seem to shimmer, it's because gold and silver strands mingle with silk and wool threads.

During the Renaissance, when the tapestries were made, they represented an enormous investment on the part of their wealthy and usually royal owners. The fabulous tapestry collection of the 16th century monarch Francis I was too much of a temptation for the rulers of post-Revolutionary France. They melted the gold and silver down to help finance the country's wars.

The tapestries at the Norton belonged to two Habsburg monarchs. Six were owned by Emperor Matthias (1557-1619) and two by Franz I (1708-1765), Maria Theresa's husband. They became part of the collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna after the monarchy collapsed in 1918.

The textiles are among the finest in the museum's renowned collection of Renaissance tapestries. This tour, developed by the museum and organized by International Arts & Artists, is the first time they have left Vienna.

The tapestries tell the mythical story of the founding of Rome by the twins Romulus and Remus, who were sired by the god Mars, hidden from their murderous uncle, suckled by a wolf, reunited with their grandfather after killing their usurping uncle and rewarded with the privilege of founding a city. Never mind that the venture provoked a quarrel during which Romulus slaughtered his brother — that's not depicted in the tapestries.

The tale was a popular subject of royal tapestries, because it identified the tapestries' owners with the heroic pair.

"The Habsburgs insisted they were descended from the Roman caesars," said Geza von Habsburg during a tour of the exhibition. "That was important for the Habsburgs, because they had to show they were the foremost family in Europe at that time." Von Habsburg is the grandson of Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria.



'Romulus and Remus Suckled by a She-Wolf,' circa 1560, is one of eight tapestries on loan from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. It measures in at 11 feet, 6 inches tall by 17 feet, 3 inches wide. That's about the width of seven doorways.

The tapestries were made in the Brussels, Belgium, workshop of Frans Geubels during the mid-16th century, when the city was the foremost tapestry-producing center in Europe and the trade employed thousands of artists, designers and weavers.

The six tapestries that belonged to Matthias are higher quality than the two from the estate of Franz I, which date from slightly later. They are more finely woven, more elaborately designed and contain more gold and silver threads.

Large-scale tapestries could take years to make, and some of the finest artists in Europe, including Raphael and Rubens, created designs for them.

"They were the prerequisites of any major ruler of the time," said Roger Ward, Norton deputy director and chief curator.

Hanging on the walls of chilly palaces and churches, tapestries served as insulation as well as decoration. And, as mentioned, they proclaimed the importance of their owners. Emperor Charles V used to travel with 96 tapestries to wow his minions on his royal progresses, Ward said.

These days, tapestries that are nearly 450 years old don't hit the road that often. Even if museums had the space to display them, they're too fragile. In fact, of the 800 tapestries in the Kunsthistorisches Museum's collection, only a few dozen typically are on view, making the exhibition at the Norton an even rarer opportunity to see these extraordinary works.

IF YOU GO

What: Habsburg Treasures: Renaissance Tapestries from the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Where: Norton Museum of Art

When: Through April 11

For more information: 832-5196 or www.norton.org