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## THE ROYAL PERFORMANCE

### The Gobelins of Christiansborg

*17 giant tapestries fill the walls of the great hall in the former royal castle of Denmark, Christiansborg. The tapestries depict in a cartoonlike, excessive and baffling way the history, present and future of Denmark. In the gobelin of the present the ruling queen **Margareta II** offers in the midst of paradise an apple to her husband prince **Henrik**.*

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Large wall tapestries, gobelins, were used in rich homes for insulation and decoration. The gobelinworks of Christiansborg were ordered in the honor of the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of Margareta II in 1990. The budget of 13 million Danish crowns was covered by an alliance of Danish business representatives and foundations.

The imagery of the gobelins was ordered from the artist **Bjørn Nørsgoordilta**. Nørsgoord studied in the 60's at the Copenhagen Experimental Art School and created communal art works and happenings that expressed leftist values and were influenced by **Joseph Beuys**. The most known and sensational were *Female Christ* (1969), in which Nørsgoord's wife **Lena Adler Petersen** walked naked through the stock exchange of Copenhagen and *Horse Sacrifice* (1970), in which Nørsgoord butchered a horse and dismembered it into small parts, which he canned. The piece provoked discussion in the media about the Vietnam war and the famine in Biafra.

The fabric was woven by a French factory active since the 17<sup>th</sup> century called *Manufacture des Gobelins*, where the term *gobelin* originated. The factory started as a family enterprise but continues now as a state-run company. The weaving of the gobelins took 30 full-time weavers ten years, which resulted in the publication of the works in the celebrations of the queen's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2000.

## History as Seen from the Throne of Denmark

As you step into the hall, a great story surrounds you. The historical setting starts from the age of the Vikings and travels through the Middle Ages to the reformation, aristocracy, absolute monarchy, and Second World War, and into the present and future. Time moves non-chronologically in the great hall, beginning with *The Viking Age* in the center of the long wall. *The Viking Age* functions as the starting image of the series, the world tree Yggdrasil rising in the middle of it reaches towards both ends of the hall, with a small crucified **Christ** hanging from a snake on its branches.

The story starting from Yggdrasil flows through time as an enormous avalanche of images, reflecting in style the art and the world of each era. Historical time is marked by the continuum of Danish kings, but branches out into a seemingly endless amount of historical events, characters, quotes from art works, symbols and stories. You could wander for days in the great hall looking for new details and reading the images with the help of the provided notation. Danish history mixes more and more with the events of the rest of the world as we approach the present, bringing in figures from beyond Denmark—from **Rousseau** to **Nietzsche** through **Darwin**; **Chaplin**, **Mao**, **Einstein**, **Bunuel** and **Donald Duck**. A few women flash amongst the male cavalcade, at least the writers **Karen Blixen** and **Virginia Woolf**, the politician **Nina Bang** and the suffragette **Christabel Pankhurst**.

When arriving to *The Present*, a tree returns to the center of the image and the queen and her prince appear under it as Eve and Adam, although not dressed like them. The pagan Yggdrasil has been replaced by Christian paradise, and instead of the sacrificed horse there are Dachshunds at the feet of the royal couple. The long-armed couple is shown at the very least in a contradictory light with the sinful fruit offered to her spouse by the birthday girl. In the *Future* image the Crown Prince **Frederik** and his brother **Joakim** mystically dissipate into a web of technological and scientific symbols, circled by a halo in the style of Christian art from the Middle Ages. Both images, *The Present* and *The Future*, are reflected in three slimmer tapestries, *entrefenêtres*, set in between the windows. The last of these is the final image of the whole series and returns to the

mythological imagery of the Viking Age and to cosmic geometry, shadowing the cross and the crown.

### **Performance of the Institution**

The relationship of the crown to the piece makes it exceptional in many ways. The pack of investors that jumped in because of the queen enabled the monumental implementation, raising traditional craftsmanship and the power of the elite into modernist artistry. Companies from Danske Bank to Siemens and Volvo combined their forces with non-profit foundations and bought a birthday present worth millions. The French craftsmen prepared the gift one thread at a time and the queen in turn exhibited the art works permanently.

At first glance Nørsgoord's path seems to move from a leftist artist involved with political performances to a middle-aged money-following servant of monarchy. Looking closer, he has continued the same work in a new, institutionalized context. His artistic attitude of questioning and opening meanings has moved to another level of dialogue, as he has glided his way to the holiest soil of the queendom. This of course also due to the particular nature of the queen - Margareta II, who also is a painter, did not at any point restrict Nørsgoord's expression. Political differences became a discussion only once, in front of the draft of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tapestry *Early Glücksburgers*. Margareta II wanted to know why Karl Marx had to be in the middle. Nørsgoord explained why, and the discussion was over.

On the surface, the gobelins of Christiansborg are a decorative element. Secondly they are an effusive and monumental series of images. Thirdly they were built as a site-specific installation, prepared for a specific space to frame its grandiose history, and framed by the context of the castle.

Fourthly, through the process, they are a performance of royalty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the possibilities it gives. The performance starts to curl open when Nørsgoord explains

why weaving was used instead of painting: "The advantage of tapestries in this kind of a room is craftsmanship. It gives to the images the same kind of gravity and time that the hall itself radiates." To fit the context of the castle, the work must be monumental, and to make the work monumental Nørsgoord takes *time* to produce it. The act of weaving over a ten-year span is integral to the artwork, and is what makes it performative. In this case the process is a performance, starting from the royal party, where the idea is spawned; moves through the Danish economy; grows in Nørsgoord's studio, where his assistants reproduce drafts and number colors; lives in the repetitive hand movements of the French craftsmen; peaks at the hanging of the gobelins in the Christiansborg palace and finally opens up to the unsuspecting spectator who innocently steps into the great hall on her tourist round.

Nørsgoord defines a monument as an art piece that grows over its' own limits and thus forms a whole with its surroundings. The decade-long process of manufacturing the gobelins tries to challenge its topic and surroundings. The millions of hand-woven threads, hundreds of thousands of work hours, hundreds of people and several years build up a royal dramaturgy that is an inseparable part of the piece. Joined with the production structure and the dissonant metaphors of the imagery it makes a fascinating art piece that will not deflate to imagery nor institution, even though it is hard to find a more institutionalized set of images.

## **Bibliography**

Tapestries for the Queen of Denmark. Handbook.