

Visit to De Wit, Manufacture Royale de Tapisserie, Mechelen

Friday 5th October 2018

The Multinational group arranged a fascinating visit to De Wit, founded in 1889 and a world-renowned restorer of tapestries, in the old town of Mechelen. A large group of Femmes (and Hommes) d'Europe met outside in bright sunshine for a catch-up chat before we joined our guides and were taken inside the beautiful old building where De Wit is housed.

In 15th century, Mechelen was the capital of the Netherlands. The building was built as a 'refuge' house as part of Tongerlo Abbey and was occupied by Representatives of the Abbey to the Netherlands government. It was bought by De Wit in 1971 and restored between 1983-1986. The fifth generation of De Wit now no longer manufactures tapestries but is the foremost restorer and cleaner of tapestries in the world for museums and private clients.

Our tour began in the Entrance hall, hung with enormous tapestries. Our excellent English-speaking guide, Kristien Mulier, explained that although the size and beauty of them is what first attracts your attention, there are also features in each one which help identify when it was made, the town where it was woven, the name of the weaver, and even marks of quality control. Tapestries were not just a symbol of wealth and status, they provided an essential function of keeping huge rooms, such as those in castles, warm!

In Brussels, tapestry work in 16th century involved a quarter of the working population. Weaving was carried out in rooms at the very top of buildings where windows were deliberately made bigger to allow in more light. The necessity for this was made very clear when our guide showed us a demonstration weaving loom and a skilled lady weaver showed us how it worked. The way that she navigated the warp and weft threads, using foot pedals to separate the two, and at the same time threading the wool at lightning speed to make the pattern was rivetting. Apparently it would have taken weavers a month to weave one square metre!

We learnt that tapestries from the 18th century were often made with a huge border round the central design, looking like a wooden frame, so that the tapestry resembled a huge picture. Tapestries from the 15th century, in contrast, often had no defined border at all, but displayed beautiful fruit and flowers. In fact, inspiration for the planting of the garden at De Wit was taken from one of the tapestries. By the 19th century, the practice of weaving tapestries by hand died out and the work started to be carried out by machine. Plant dyes were replaced by synthetic dyes, one reason being that the brown dyes used in the Renaissance era attacked the wool. However, happily it also was found that moths do not like old wool!

The restoring of tapestries is an exacting and very time-consuming profession. Our guide explained that now, in an age where honesty and transparency is paramount, repairs to tapestries do not try to be invisible. The repairs are

worked so they are not obvious, unless you look very closely, but they are able to be seen. It also means they can be re-worked if need be. The cleaning of tapestries is also an important part of De Wit's work. In a specially created room, the tapestry is laid out flat and a 'mist' of water and detergent is used to remove dust and dirt before the tapestry is dried and returned, carefully rolled and covered, to its owner, often accompanied on its journey by a member of the museum staff. Sadly we were not allowed to see this process but our guide provided pictures.

The last part of our tour was in the very top of the building where there are samples of modern tapestries (one of which was displayed in the Belgian pavilion at the 1937 World fair in Paris) which could not be more different to the ancient tapestries on the floors below. I know which I preferred!

Our grateful thanks go to the Multinational group for organizing such an interesting and informative visit – as one lady remarked, “I shall never look at a tapestry in the same way again”!

Rosie Collins
(UK Group)