Imagining Christian kingship in Sigismund II Augustus's "Genesis" tapestries at Wawel Castle (1553)

Stackpole, C.A.

Chapter Four: The Politics of Materials and Style

According to the seven-step method proposed in the Introduction, the first layer of reading the content of a tapestry series is its materiality and style, both of which were among the stand-out elements of *Genesis* to Orzechowski in his *ekphrasis*. In the case of *Genesis*, this style is mannerism in the figural scenes, and Netherlandish grotesque in the borders. The material and stylistic properties of *Genesis* certainly had a profound impact on the audience, awing them with richness, intricacy, and splendour. While this served the obvious function of furthering the patron's magnificence, it is possible to delve deeper into how materials and style interfaced with the series' project of image-creation and political/religious agenda. Among the mannerist facets at play, the *enargeic* and immersive potential in particular (that was so fundamental for Orzechowski) raises questions about the didactic power of the tapestries. Were these, indeed, "images that teach," in the ekphrasist's words, or images that astounded–or both?[339] Can there be any reciprocity between *enargeia* and didactic function?

Finally, the issue of the tapestries' immersiveness raises questions about the borders, which seem, at least at first glance, to shatter the illusion. However, we must take a closer look at both the function and style of the borders to ascertain whether they are, indeed, separate from the main narrative. To what extent do they truly hinder *enargeia*? On the other hand, to what extent does their Netherlandish grotesque style complement or complicate the style and narrative of the centrepieces?

[339] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53.

4.1. The Materiality of Magnificence

Beyond the broad associations of tapestry as a medium of princes, as outlined in Chapter One, the material specificities of the medium made it a powerful vehicle for image-creation, as the eyewitness account of the unveiling reveals.

As deftly crafted and technically innovative works of art, heavily influenced by the painterly techniques used in Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles* cartoons, Coxcie's designs would have immediately commanded the attention of the wedding guests.[340] However, their impact would have been tremendously amplified by their manipulation of space, light, and sound in the king's chambers during the wedding reception. By far the best source on the affective potential of the tapestries upon their unveiling is Orzechowski's *ekphrasis*. By viewing the tapestries as composed of what Susanna Burghartz et al call "agentive materials," it is possible to consider the agency of the tapestries on the onlooker based solely on their material elements.[341]

To begin with the size of the tapestries, it is first important to note their range of dimensions.[342] The size of the tapestries' varies minimally by height but considerably by width, and can be divided into four sub-categories. The largest are the panoramas (*Paradise Bliss* (4.8 x 8.5 m), *The Building of the Ark* (4.8 x 7.9 m), *The Animals Enter the Ark* (4.8 x 7.9 m), *The Flood* (4.8 x 8.4 m), *The Animals Exit the Ark* (4.8 x 8.8 m), and *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice* (4.8 x 7.1 m), The most common size are nearly-square rectangles, all of which have a height around 4.3-4.7 m and a width between 4.3 and 5.8 m (*Adam Cultivates the Earth, Abel's Sacrifice*, *Cain Kills Abel*, *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, *The*

[340] Piwocka, "Nie Tylko Rafael," 231.
[341] Burgharz et al, "Introduction," 36.
[342] It is necessary to give the caveat that these are the dimensions of the restored tapestries in their current state at Wawel, after being reconstructed from the re-cut versions and other smaller fragments found in Russia. While every effort was allegedly made to preserve the exact design of the tapestries and their borders, it is possible that the original pieces may have differed by a few centimetres.

Moral Downfall of Mankind, God Converses with Noah). Two tapestries are slightly more rectangular than the second group, but appear much more square than their measurements, as they are surrounded by the rest of the Noah panoramas: these are *God Blesses Noah's Family* and *Noah's Drunkenness*, both at 4.8 x 6.1 m. The only outlier is *Fratricide Conceived*, which is a narrow, portrait-oriented rectangle (4.7 x 2.5 m). Unfortunately, none of the dimensions of the Moses tapestries are known.

There does not appear to be a clear political or theological reason for highlighting certain scenes with larger tapestries, nor do the panoramas necessarily feature the moments of Sigismund's strongest identification with the protagonists. (In fact, Noah does not even appear in *The Flood*.) The tapestries do decrease in size between the exile from Eden and *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, but then increase for the Noah set. The biblical narrative does not suggest any such relationship between the "importance" of the stories. In general, it seems likely that the panoramas were chosen because they were the most dramatic, dynamic, and aesthetically rich episodes that would make the greatest impact in woven form. The Garden of Eden and the Flood happen to have the most potential in this regard compared, for example, to the Cain and Abel story. However, it is relevant that the panoramas were at least initially displayed in places most directly connected with Sigismund's magnificence: the bedchamber and the Senator's Hall (see Appendix 3 for maps). In this sense, the panoramas do the most work in furthering the image-creation project.

Despite their size, it is also necessary to consider just how much of the tapestries would have been visible to the wedding guests, and how the existing architecture and furnishings of the rooms would have enhanced or detracted from the experience. Unveiled in the evening by candlelight, the tapestries would not have been as clearly visible as they would have been in daylight. Depending on the placement of the candles, the low lighting

would have obscured certain elements in shadows, while bringing the lighter elements (especially those woven with golden thread) to the forefront. In addition, based on Orzechowski's text, we know that *Paradise Bliss* was placed behind the marriage bed, which likely would have hidden the lower-central section of the tapestry. It is possible, although not documented, that other furniture and lighting fixtures may have hidden elements of other tapestries in other rooms.

Nevertheless, the tapestries would have dwarfed the viewer. Reaching from floor to ceiling, and hanging next to each other, they completely covered the walls and transformed the room. Upon entering the chambers, the viewer would have been dropped in the middle of the book of Genesis, surrounded by the vastness and richness of the divine theatre of creation, standing amidst the gigantic patriarchs and the Creator Himself.

For the purposes of Sigismund's image-creation, size played a fundamental role. By awing his courtiers and subjects with his wealth, he created an unmistakable material gap between royal magnificence and that of the nobility and episcopate. Prominent bishops and magnate houses did indeed own tapestries, but none could boast the splendour and monetary value of *Genesis*. In the context of the Polish monarchy, constantly engaged in a precarious dance with Church and *szlachta*, and especially considering Sigismund's flirtations with absolutism throughout his reign, this gap was an especially potent signifier of royal supremacy.

The size of the tapestries did not only make a claim about the king's wealth and power, but also of his privileged position in relation to God. By creating an immersive sacred environment within his own palace, Sigismund provided an ideal place for

contemplating scripture and morals, and for imagining proximity to the divine. In this way, the patron offered the means *par excellence* for his subjects to connect with God.[343]

The impact of the 360-degree environment would have been enhanced by the swells and ripples of the textiles with the air flow in the room, and the flickering of the candlelight on the golden threads interwoven through them. This would have created the illusion of movement, that the flora, fauna, and biblical figures were truly alive in the room. Certain elements of the tapestries woven with gold thread or with a contrasting weave (e.g. the rain and water in *The Flood*) would have also stood out from the rest of the two-dimensional image due to their texture and visual weight, giving them a three-dimensional effect that would have "jumped out" at the viewer.[344]

When they entered the king's chambers, the onlookers entered an insulated artificial environment, sealed from outside noise, light, and cold. Collapsing the border between audience and image, the viewer could become an active participant in the events of Genesis. In Orzechowski's words, the viewer of *Paradise Bliss* "could be overcome by fear at the sight of Adam's flight, of Eve's trembling...so that you would say that you yourself were damned, and that a sentence had been pronounced upon you." Meanwhile, *The Flood* was "full of chaos and so terrified the viewer that he himself, struck by fear at such a terrible sight, feared for himself amidst the flood and dreamed of the ark."[345]

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[343] It is possible to take this interpretation one step further and deduce that Sigismund was establishing himself as a kind of intermediary to God or priestly figure, which would naturally have controversial implications regarding the role of the king in ecclesiastical leadership (i.e. as the head of a national church). However, it seems very unlikely that Sigismund would have intended to make any sort of explicitly anticlerical or antipapal statement with these tapestries. At the time of the commission, the creation of a Polish national church was not yet a fully-formed agenda within the Protestant camps, and Sigismund had not shown any inclination toward such a project. Moreover, considering Sigismund's general policy *via media* religious politics, as well as the lack of other confessional messages in *Genesis*, this does not seem to be a likely interpretation of Sigismund's intentions.

[344] See Richardson and Hamling, "Ways of Seeing Early Modern Decorative Textiles," 10.

[345] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 54-55.

Finally, the location of the tapestries within Wawel Castle is yet another crucial element in understanding their consequent communicative power (see Appendix 3). Beginning in the royal bedchamber, winding through the vestibule, and finally expanding into the Senators' Hall, they were all located in the king's innermost sanctum in the castle, rooms in which only distinguished guests could be admitted.[346] *Paradise Bliss* hung right above the marital bed, underscoring the association of the royal couple with the First Parents. Sixteenth-century royal bedchambers were certainly not private or intimate spaces, as they were frequently populated by countless attendants and were often the site of audiences with kings. However, as access was restricted to chosen courtiers and guests, it still cannot be considered a public space within the palace, and was arguably the space most closely associated with the king's physical person among the *Genesis* chambers. Even Orzechowski notes that some of the guests "did not enter the royal bedchamber out of respect," underscoring the private and personal nature of this space.[347]

On the other hand, the most public of the chambers in which *Genesis* was unveiled was the Senators' Hall, where meetings of the Senate were held. If the bedchamber was most closely aligned with the body natural, the Senator's Hall was the sanctuary of the body politic at Wawel. Consequently, the hall held the most dramatic, large-scale, and complex subset, perhaps the episodes deemed most worthy of display to the widest audience: the story of Noah. Still, the Senators' Hall was not a space with unrestricted access for courtiers and even the kingdom's elites. The Senate comprised only the most powerful bishops and magnates of the realm, as well as the King himself, excluding the majority of the *szlachta.* Therefore, we can consider the Senator's Hall a "public" space only for a very niche

[346] We also know that Sigismund specifically instructed his High Treasurer, Jan Lutomirski, where to hang the tapestries within his chambers. Fabiański, "Renaissance Nudes," 257-259.
[347] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy,* 54.

audience, perhaps the audience with which Sigismund was most interested in communicating through his tapestries.

In general, these were rooms which would only have been privy to carefully selected men and women. Thus, the tapestries adorning (and transforming) the king's chambers conveyed a combination of intimacy and majesty. Their proximity to his person forged both a figurative and physical link between the subject matter of the tapestries and the body of the king. Moreover, it asserted Sigismund's authorship over the messages they conveyed, and linked them in the most intimate way to his project as king. In short, the images, narratives, and messages conveyed through the tapestries could be seen as inextricable from his kingship.

What, then, is the overall impact of the materiality of the tapestries and their environment on Sigismund Augustus's image? Their effect on viewers vicariously affected the perception of their patron and owner, Sigismund. Their magnificence enhanced his own. Their craftsmanship, size, lavishness, and awe-inspiring immersive potential reflected on his taste, wealth, and cultural capital. Their religious content and devotional potential could only be conveyed to the viewer through him, the patron.

In addition, the quasi-immersion created an environment in which viewers could become fully enveloped in the story Sigismund was presenting to them, like an audience at a play. Therefore, they would be primed to absorb their themes and morals. Their tight association with their patron as the *pièce de résistance* of his wedding feast, hanging in the palace rooms most closely linked to his physical and figurative person, would have helped the viewer to draw connections between their content and the king, as Orzechowski did in his *ekphrasis*.

Moving from the materials of the tapestries to the images they contained, we find that the style of the tapestry cartoons worked in tandem with their physical properties, both to convey magnificence and to draw the viewer closer to their didactic programme.

4.2. Mannerism, a Style of Excess

In describing the style of the Jagiellonian tapestries, the term most frequently used by Polish researchers is "mannerist." Before considering how Coxcie's mannerism could have impacted the didactic content of the tapestries, it is important to note that "mannerism" is a highly contested term among art historians, with conflicting definitions, scope, and connotations across time. According to John Shearman, mannerism is a heterogeneous concept rather than a movement with a conscious direction.[348] For example, Vasari used *maniera* in a positive sense to indicate a modern style (*la maniera moderna* or *bella maniera*) used by contemporary artists, a kind of virtuoso quality to art that showed complexity without effort. However, Bellori's *Lives of the Artists* a century later used *maniera* as a derogatory term for the decline of Italian art after Raphael. Later scholars oscillated between positive or negative uses of "mannerism," and expanded its use to descriptions of poetry, music, literature, and art outside of Italy. The criteria of what qualifies as mannerist, and the implications of such a designation, have been somewhat vague. Moreover, there is debate as to whether the term is essentially presentist, as it was an attempt by nineteenth and twentieth century art historians to categorise mid-sixteenth century Italian art retroactively because of its deviations from the "norm" of High Renaissance art.[349]

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[348] John Shearman, *Mannerism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 16.

[349] Lynette M. F. Bosch, *Mannerism, Spirituality, and Cognition: The Art of Enargeia* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 72-85; Shearman, *Mannerism*, 16-18.

However, since the term's re-popularisation in the late 1960s by Shearman and Fritz Grossman, mannerism continues to be an operable term for discussing mid-sixteenth century art (see Fig. 12 for an example). A loosely-bound cluster of common concepts related to mannerism has emerged from the writings of Shearman, Linda Murray, Alastair Smart, Arnold Hauser, and others, including:[350]

- A focus on physicality, strength, musculature, and movement;
- Elongated bodies in stylised, sometimes unnatural poses;
- Heightened emotion in facial expressions;
- Complexity of composition;
- A lack or subversion of clear perspective;
- A tension between naturalism and artifice/abstraction.

Fig. 14 Agnolo Bronzino, *The Resurrection of Christ*, 1552, oil on canvas. Florence, Santissima Annunziata. An example of early mannerism around the time of the *Genesis* tapestries.

[350] See Shearman, *Mannerism*; Linda Murray, *The Late Renaissance and Mannerism* (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1967); Alastair Smart, *The Renaissance and Mannerism in Italy* (New York: Harcourt, 1971); Ibid., *The Renaissance and Mannerism in Northern Europe and Spain* (New York: Harcourt, 1972); Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art, Vol II: Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque* (London: Routledge, 1999).

One macro-concept that links most of these ideas together is the notion of mannerism as "a style of excess," in John Shearman's words.[351] It is also noteworthy that the rise of mannerism marked the advent of self-awareness among artists, as exemplified in Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*.[352]

By the 1540s, mannerism had become firmly established across Europe as the "court style *par excellence*," essentially associated with aristocrats and royalty. From Fontainebleau to Florence, many of the premier court painters were mannerists.[353] By this time, mannerist cartoons in the style of Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles* had also taken hold as the default style for tapestry (see Fig. 13 and 14).[354] Thus, by injecting mannerism into the Wawel collection, Sigismund would have fulfilled his expected role as a patron of worldly, princely artworks, in a style that had become a metonym for power.

Fig. 15 Raphael, *The Sacrifice at Lystra*, c. 1516, bodycolour on paper. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

[351] Shearman, *Mannerism*, 171.
[352] Ibid., 44, 162; Hauser, *Mannerism*, 100.
[353] Ibid., 104-105.
[354] Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 187.

Fig. 16 Raphael, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, c. 1516, bodycolour on paper. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

The foreign and novel character of mannerist art for mid-sixteenth-century Poland also contributed to this. As Helena Kozakiewicz's research has shown, there are very few instances of mannerism in Poland prior to the 1570s, Sigismund's tapestries being the most obvious exception. Among the forerunners of mannerism in Poland, Kozakiewicz notes the work of the sculptor Hieronim Canavesi (1525-1582) and certain altarpieces in Wielkopolska, although the works she cites as specifically mannerist are from the 1570s.[355] We may, however, refer to *The Descent from the Cross*, an anonymous work in the Basilica of St. Catherine of Alexandria in Braniewo, likely commissioned by Stanisław Hosius (bishop of the region since 1551) around the middle of the century (Fig. 15).[356] The lack of precise dating makes it impossible to state whether this work preceded *Genesis*, but it is certainly a striking example of early mannerism, especially in the hypermuscular and contorted bodies and faces of the figures.

[355] Kozakiewicz, *Renesans i manieryzm*, 84-85, 101.
[356] Joanna Ziętkiewicz-Kotz et al, eds., *Obraz Złotego Wieku*: *Kultura wizualna w czasach ostatnich Jagiellonów*, vol. 1, (Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 2023), 59.

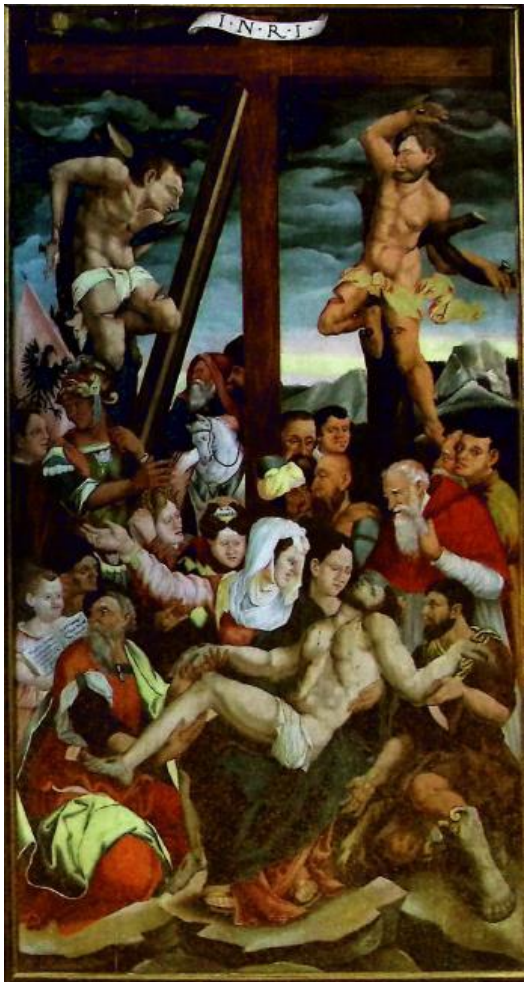

Fig. 17 Anonymous painter, *The Descent from the Cross*, after 1550, oil on panel. Braniewo, Kościół św. Katarzyny Aleksandryjskiej.

Regarding tapestry in particular, while none of Bona Sforza and Sigismund the Old's tapestries have survived, we do know from inventories that Bona had acquired a *Story of Abraham* set by the time of her death in 1557.[357] This was almost certainly a copy of the 1543 Coecke van Aelst set for Henry VIII, which is designed in a very similar mannerist and Raphaelan style to *Genesis*, although we have no way of knowing whether Bona acquired these tapestries before or after 1553, and whether they were ever displayed at Wawel or only at her private residences in Warsaw or Bari. Otherwise, the closest stylistic antecedents to *Genesis* that were certainly displayed at Wawel were the tapestries that Sigismund's first wife Elizabeth brought as part of her dowry in 1543, and which remained

[357] Jedzinskaitė-Kuizinienė, *Tapestries*, 18.

in Sigismund's collection after her death in 1545: *The Story of Romulus and Remus* (eleven pieces, see Fig. 16) and *The Story of Nebuchadnezzar* (twelve pieces). The former was a copy of a 1531 set for Catherine and John of Portugal, with cartoons by Van Orley, whose signature style more closely reflects tapestry trends before the mannerist revolution of Raphael's *Acts*.[358] The latter is of unknown provenance and authorship, and there are no extant sixteenth-century *Nebuchadnezzar* tapestries. Therefore, unless this unknown *Nebuchadnezzer* set was a design by Coecke van Aelst, Coxcie, or another cartoonist working in the post-*Acts* style, it is extremely likely that *Genesis* was the first tapestry set at Wawel to truly represent the new school of mannerist tapestry.

Fig. 18 Bernaert van Orley (cartoon), unknown Brussels workshop, *Faustulus Meets Romulus and Remus*, 1525-1530, wool, silk, gold and silver thread. Madrid, Patrimonio Nacional.

Despite the fact that mannerism had not yet established a firm foothold in Polish art culture, it is clear from Orzechowski's descriptions that an elite Polish audience was fully capable of understanding and appreciating the style, likely due to their exposure to similar

[358] Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 268.

works either in person or through prints. Orzechowski makes multiple references throughout the *ekphrasis* specifically to the artistic merit of the tapestries and the skill of the artist in relation to certain mannerist elements, especially a focus on physicality, physiognomy, and emotional excess: the "remarkable nature of the materials and artistry" in *Paradise Bliss*; "the sin of Adam and the wrath of God [depicted] in all its shades and details" in the same tapestry; "how mad Cain bites his own hand in anger" portrayed by "the skilled hand of the artist" in *Abel's Offering*; "the face of the fierce tyrant, wonderfully presented: the taut neck, the crazed eyes, the tormented face, the bristled hair, and finally the blow itself" in *Cain Kills Abel*; "the wrathful God looking down at the earth" and "the remains of Abel, covered with gore, disfigured by pallour, terrifying to behold" presented "with unbelievable artistry" in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*; how "the artist skillfully showed how criminal Cain's progeny were" in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*; the "illustrious artistry" of *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice* and how "the particular ornaments of this tapestry were the flaccid remains of the drowned, rotting in the water and putrid."[359] The references to the artist and his stylistic flair suggest that Orzechowski understood, at least on some level, the self-awareness that was at the core of mannerism, and the importance of style both in creating art of high quality and high emotional impact. The fact that Orzechowski hearkens back to the artist especially in his descriptions of the tapestries' physicality and drama also suggests that the quintessentially mannerist elements of *Genesis* were striking to the audience and had their intended affective impact.

Considering the twenty extant *Genesis* tapestries as a whole, many elements from the mannerist "cluster" are immediately apparent. One of the most obvious applications of excess in the tapestries is in their scale: not only of the physical pieces, of the vast composition of the woven scenes, and of the heights of the patriarchs (see Fig. 17). Like

[359] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53-55.

the minor characters dwarfed by the large protagonists in the scenes, the viewer must crane their head upward to fully appreciate the textiles, effectively creating a point of view of a small figure surrounded by giants. The fact that these "giants" were some of the most important fathers of the Christian religion and God Himself would have made this all the more imposing.

Fig. 19 Detail of *The Building of the Ark*. Note the height of Noah compared to the other figures.

As a result, the viewer of the tapestry would find themselves in a similar situation to a viewer of sacral art in a liturgical setting. As Marc Bayard describes, artwork that demands to be viewed from below reaffirms the humility of the worshipper before a sacred image, and grants them a position of both inferiority and distance from which they are better able to contemplate the theological or moral content.[360] Moreover, the excess in the tapestries' scale is reflected in the images within the borders. The scenes are typified by distant horizons, wide vistas, and scenes stretching into the far background (Fig. 18).[361] In

[360] Marc Bayard, "In Front of the Work of Art: The Question of Pictorial Theatricality in Italian Art, 1400-1700," *Art History* 33, no. 2 (2010): 274.
[361] Piwocka mentions the "wide scenes" and "distant horizons" in her description of the *Genesis* series. Piwocka, "Art of majesty" 404. See also Fabienne Joubert et al, *Histoire de la tapisserie: En Europe, du Moyen Age à nos jours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 115.

particular, the panoramic tapestries would have required the viewer to walk across the room to view the entire scene, thereby amplifying the impression of the breadth of the world.

Fig. 20 Background vista of *The Animals Enter the Ark*.

Based on scholarship on other concurrent figural series, the literal and perceived scale of the world of *Genesis* mimics the worlds created at other courts by the same medium. For example, Elizabeth Cleland describes Pieter Coecke van Aelst's tapestries as triggering the "feel of an epic narrative," with "huge casts of characters stretching from foreground to distant vistas."[362] In this sense, Sigismund's tapestries employ the same visual vocabulary as the court tapestries of his international peers. A viewer awed at the magnificence of the patron's tapestries, and by the figures within them perhaps functioning as his avatars, could be awed by the magnificence of the patron himself.

The theme of excess carries into the figures as well: not only in their size, but in their physicality and dynamism. Each tapestry in the *Genesis* series features huge bodies, many with the elongated proportions typical of mannerism, posed in solid stances with strong physiques (see Fig. 19 and 20). This creates what Piwocka calls a "noble monumentalism," evoking a kind of Herculean masculinity and reminiscent of Greco-

[362] Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 237.

Roman statues–unsurprisingly, given that Coxcie primarily relied on classical models for his figures.[363]

Fig. 21 Detail of *Abel's Sacrifice*.

Fig. 22 Detail of *Cain Kills Abel*

The terms that Piwocka chooses to describe these effects are very telling, and hint at a more nuanced view of physicality in the tapestries than simply "excess." While the overpowering, exaggerated stature of the bodies is often "excessive" in comparison to the size and detail of their surroundings (for example, Adam is almost as large as the Tree of Life in *Paradise Bliss*), they never threaten to disrupt the fine equilibrium of the scenes. The movement seems meticulously choreographed, not frenetic, and even the most unnatural poses are designed along the classical S-curve (see Fig. 21 and 22). Elizabeth Cleland describes a very similar effect in Coecke Van Aelst's *Jacob* and *Abraham* series as a "gentle rhythm" of action.[364]

[363] Piwocka, "Art of majesty," 404; Ibid, "Nie tylko Rafael," 232; Joubert et al, *Histoire*, 115.
[364] Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 237.

Fig. 23 Detail of *The Flood*. Note the use of the S-curve in the contorted poses.

Fig. 24 Detail of *The Moral Downfall of Mankind.*

The overall *mise-en-scene* of the tapestries also helps ground the kinetic elements and keep them in balance within the scenes. Here, we are faced with another of the central tenets of mannerism: an interplay between extremes. As Shearman and Hauser mention, mannerist art often blends grace, elegance, and harmony with tension and instability.[365] Similarly, for Piwocka, the *Genesis* series combines serenity with drama.[366] On a macro-level, the interplay between extremes is visible across the series. Certain tapestries filled

[365] Hauser, *Mannerism*, 100-101, 103; Shearman, *Mannerism*, 19, 23.
[366] Magdalena Piwocka, "W kręgu mistrzów cinquecenta: Michiel Coxcie i temat heroiczny," *Studia Waweliana*, no. 15 (2013): 22

with movement and drama such as *The Flood* and *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* form a sharp contrast to the poised, statuesque tableaux of *God Conversing with Noah* and *Fratricide Conceived*, or to the central and largest scene in *Paradise Bliss* (see Fig. 23).

Fig. 25 Composition of *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* versus *God Converses with Noah*.

On an individual level, the tapestries show contrasts between staticity and dynamism, peace and discord, order and chaos. Although each scene features movement, multiple characters, and sometimes even multiple vignettes, everything is anchored by symmetry and either diagonal or semicircular composition. A prime example of this is *Paradise Bliss*, which, following the scriptural chronology, sets the compositional tone as the first episode. It uses a semicircular construction, wherein the episodes of the story are hierarchised according to their proximity to the viewer (Fig. 24).[367] This hierarchy has crucial implications: God conversing with Adam and Eve at the Tree of Life is the crux of the story, not the Fall. In other words, the tapestry is centred on the relationship between man and God, not the betrayal of that relationship through sin, and, therefore, on the promise of the continuation and renewal of that relationship.

[367] Gębarowicz and Mańkowski, *Arrasy*, 71.

Fig. 26 Semicircular continuous narration in *Paradise Bliss*, centred on the Tree of Life.

The harmony of *Paradise Bliss* introduces the visual motif of the divine "theatre" of nature in the series. According to Ann Blair, the term *theatrum naturale*, originating with Philo of Alexandria, is found in the titles of over one hundred scientific and philosophical texts from 1500-1700. Although the precise meaning of this metaphor morphed over time, its sixteenth century interpretation was of a divinely-created world: vast, intricately ordered, and elaborately designed.[368] For example, Guillaume Rondelet opens *Libri de piscibus marinis*, published one year after the tapestries' unveiling, with the assertion that:

> Man has been placed in such a beautiful domicile, or even more, such a magnificent theatre...the whole fashioned with such great artifice, ornamented with such excellent beauty, assembled and composed with such great harmony.[369]

This ideal of cosmic harmony with God as both creator and commander, evident in *Paradise Bliss*, promotes the notion of an eternal, omnipresent, and omnipotent Divine, a constant and trustworthy overseer of Sigismund's Poland. In the context of princely image-

[368] Ann Blair, *The Theater of Nature: Jean Bodin and Renaissance Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 155.
[369] Guillaume Rondelet, *L'Histoire Entière des Poissons* (Lyon: Macé Bonhomme, 1558), 9.

creation, this could be extrapolated to the King himself as a divinely-ordained leader and protector, tasked with maintaining peace and control in the kingdom.

Cosmic order is reflected and reaffirmed throughout the subsequent tapestries, even in more dynamic scenes than the fairly-static opening tapestry. For example, the action of *Abel's Sacrifice* plays out across two clear diagonals, establishing visual symmetry. The best example, however, may be in *God Converses with Noah.* As the overture to the Noah subset, it echoes the circular composition of the first Adam tapestry, *Paradise Bliss*. Noah and God walk together, circling each other, both in contrapposto, both wearing red robes, against a symmetrical woodland background (see Fig. 25). After the increasing violence and drama of the Cain sub-set, there is a promise of harmonious restoration through the new patriarch.

Fig. 27 Compositional order in *Abel's Sacrifice* and *God Converses with Noah*.

Even the most kinetically-charged tapestries such as *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* and *The Flood* do not descend into unbridled chaos. They are indeed full of bodies, yet they never appear overcrowded. The bodies are given enough space to twist and move. There is enough horizontal space in each frame for the actions and emotions of the characters to be legible through their poses, and thus for the narrative and message of the scene to be easily comprehensible. Mark Evans notes a similar effect in the *Acts of the*

Apostles cartoons, which feature "weighty figures acting out a series of momentous encounters" yet with enough room to focus on one "specific dramatic moment for each panel."[370] Moreover, these scenes still maintain compositional order through the use of a clear diagonal (*Moral Downfall*, Fig. 26) or through semicircular organisation of vignettes grounded by a dominant central scene (*The Flood, Paradise Bliss*, see Fig. 24).

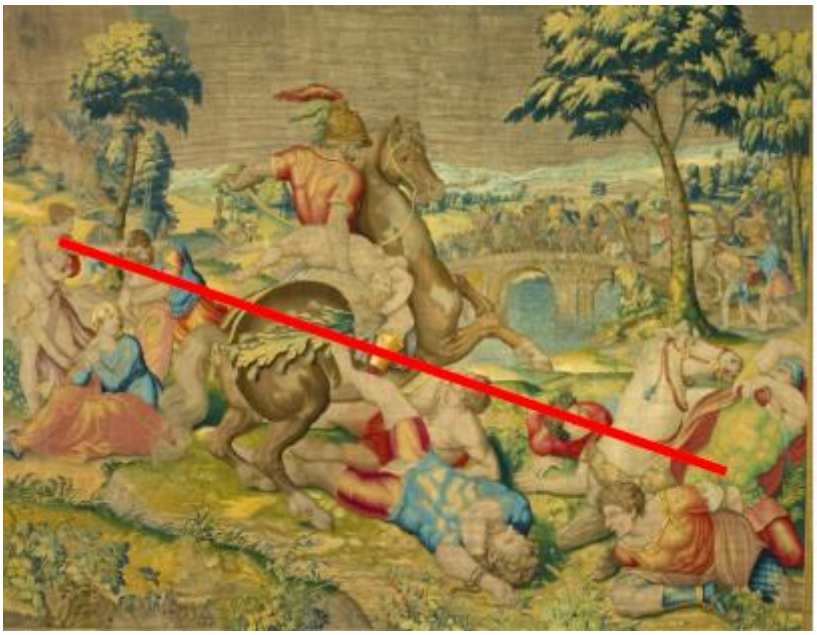

Fig. 28 Diagonal in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

All of these compositional elements contribute to an aesthetically pleasing and harmonious image, indicative of a discerning and cultured patron, yet it is possible to extrapolate another ideological angle from these stylistic choices. On the one hand, the tapestries' physical and kinetic "excesses" may be read as part of the project of magnificence, both in their awe-inspiring scale and in their promotion of an image of strength, power, and masculinity. On the other hand, just as these elements are kept under control by the grounding features of the image, so too is the patron (using these princely virtues of strong leadership) in control of the potentially destabilising elements in his own

[370] Mark Evans et al, *Raphael: Cartoons and Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* (London: V&A, 2004), 8, 45. Cleland et al also note a similar effect in Van Aelst's biblical tapestries, full of bodies "vibrating with life" yet anchored by the static architecture. Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 237.

world. Despite the violence and chaos that the tapestries may portray in their most dramatic moments, equilibrium is restored and the promise of salvation is fulfilled.

With that said, is there also perhaps a theological element to this order/chaos dichotomy? It is possible to read the *Genesis* series' composition as an ode to a powerful yet merciful God, a Creator who holds sway over all, never abandons His children despite their sins, and maintains control even in the midst of cataclysmic destruction. Meanwhile, as the patron, Sigismund is posited as God's messenger, conveying this promise of salvation to his subjects. Even when the themes of princely virtue are not at the forefront of the tapestries' messaging, Sigismund retains a central presence. His reprisal of the role of his patriarchal exemplars *vis a vis* his own people bolsters his magnificence.

Thus, power, both in secular and spiritual terms, emerges as one of the core themes conveyed through the stylistic "excesses" of the tapestries. Still, further questions emerge: just how impactful would these "excesses" have been for the contemporary viewer, and how did style aid or hinder the transmission of the tapestries' messages? An examination of the *Genesis* series's vividity and immersive potential may answer these queries.

4.3. *Enargeia*, Affect, and "Images that Teach"

In *Mannerism, Spirituality, and Cognition: The Art of Enargeia*, Lynette Bosch draws parallels between the classical rhetorical technique of *enargeia* and the vividness of *maniera* in mannerist art as understood by Alberti and Vasari. As mentioned in Chapter Three, *enargeia* is the classical rhetorical trope of bringing images to life by making the invisible visible, the past current, and the absent present. It allows the viewer to feel as though they were physically in the scene, to experience "the emotions of other times and

places" vicariously, and to "awaken the emotions of the spectator in a sympathetic manner that would enhance the participatory aspect."[371]

Bosch explains that *enargeia* was used as a tool for conversion via sermons in the early Church, as it could stir the imaginations and emotions of the congregation and transport them back to the times of Christ. This technique continued to be used into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance with the popularity of the writings of mystics and books such as Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* (c. 1418-1427). His contemporary Alberti believed that art and faith went hand in hand: since the beauty of nature arises from God, approximating it through art is praise of God's glory.[372] Like the sermons employing *enargeia*, a painting could ignite a religious experience which brings one closer to God and "fills our minds with sound religious beliefs."[373] Vasari would later adopt this view into his explanation of *maniera*, God's gift to the world inspired by creation, bestowed so that humanity might come to know Him better through divinely-inspired artworks.[374] In short, *maniera* is a conduit to God for the spectator.

It is important not to confuse *enargeia* with lifelikeness in this sense, as Vasari did not see *maniera* as an attempt to replicate reality as accurately as possible. *Enargeia* is better understood as "vividity" which, in the case of mannerist art, is often achieved through musculature, physiognomy, and gesture.[375] In fact, we can find references to this understanding of *enargeia* as early as Plato's *Timaeus*, which describes the predilection to perceive *enargeia* in art through depictions of motion and energy.[376] Later, Alberti

[371] Bosch, *Mannerism*, 26.
[372] Ibid., 38.
[373] Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson (1435, reis., London: Penguin, 2004), 60.
[374] Bosch, *Mannerism*, 33.
[375] On gesture in *ekphrasis*, see also Caroline Van Eck and Stijn Bussels, ""Theatricality and the Early Modern Visual Arts," *Art History* 33, no. 2 (2010): 215.
[376] Bosch, *Mannerism*, 28.

famously stated that "a *historia* will move spectators when the men painted in the picture outwardly demonstrate their own feelings as clearly as possible…yet these feelings are known from movements of the body."[377] When applied specifically to dynamism and movement, we may also refer to Aristotle's concept of the *energeia* (energy or vigour) of a text or artwork. While *enargeia* and *energeia* should not be confused, they may work in tandem to achieve an overall affective experience, especially in cases such as *Genesis* (and much mannerist art in general) where the kinesis of the figures takes centre stage.

If we can locate the *enargeic* (and *energeic*) potential of an artwork in its vividity, then the *Genesis* tapestries emerge as truly powerful conductor. Indeed, Orzechowski seems to have been highly receptive to *enargeia* at the unveiling, as can be deduced from the *ekphrasis's* many descriptions of the tapestries' overpowering affective impact on the viewer (Fig. 27). For example, he recounts how Adam and Eve stood in the Garden "as if they were alive," while the scene of God conversing with Noah "lacked only movement and speech, and the rest was presented as if it were alive." Similarly, the remains of Abel are described as lying "before the eyes of the viewer, terrifying to behold," as if they were truly in front of the audience, and not removed from them as an artistic representation in fabric. The emotions expressed by the guests suggest that the tapestries evoked a *trompe l'oeil* effect: according to Orzechowski in reference to *The Animals Exit the Ark*, "no one will ever be able to imagine something closer to reality."[378]

[377] Cited in Bayard, "In Front of the Work of Art," 268.
[378] Orzechowski, *Panegyricus*, in *Arrasy*, 51-55.

Fig. 29 Some enargeic moments in *Genesis* mentioned by Orzechowski (L to R: *Cain Kills Abel*, *Paradise Bliss*, *God Converses with Noah*, *The Flood*).

Consequently, if we can pinpoint much of the affective potential of the tapestries to their use of *enargeia*, is it possible to draw any links between affect and message in their reception? Perhaps on the most literal level, if one views the tapestries primarily as religious art, they can be read as tools to trigger a religious experience in the viewer, strengthen faith, and encourage moral contemplation, much like the *enargeic* sermons of the early Church. This could have also strengthened Sigismund's image as a Christian prince, as the owner of such sacral art.

However, if one considers the tapestries primarily as court art with didactic functions, not meditational aids, it is possible that their *enargeic* potential may still have helped the audience to absorb their messages more deeply. St. Paul believed that using

enargeia in sermons would help the congregants to internalise the messages, seek out applications in their own lives, and develop a more personal relationship with Christ.[379] Could the profound affective experiences of the tapestries' viewers extrapolate to a more personal experience with their patron and owner by proxy? Going on step further, both Longinus and Plato believed that *enargeia* could actually generate belief in audiences through the participatory experiences it created.[380] Did the tapestries, through their *enargeia*, have the potential to generate belief in Sigismund's kingship and agenda?

Orzechowski's *ekphrastic* descriptions may be important tools in proposing answers to these questions. His florid depictions of the sensory potential of the tapestries describe the audience personally experiencing the sounds, emotions, and physical sensations of the *Genesis* scenes (Fig. 28). For example, in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, "all sorts of wild birds raised their voices at Eve, recalling her sin and mocking her exile." *The Building of the Ark* "was presented in such a way that one could almost hear the voices of the workers and the clanging of axes at work," while one could almost smell the "putrid" and "flaccid remains of the drowned, rotting from the water" in *The Animals Exit the Ark*.[381]

[379] Bosch, *Mannerism*, 38.
[380] Ibid., 27.
[381] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 51-55.

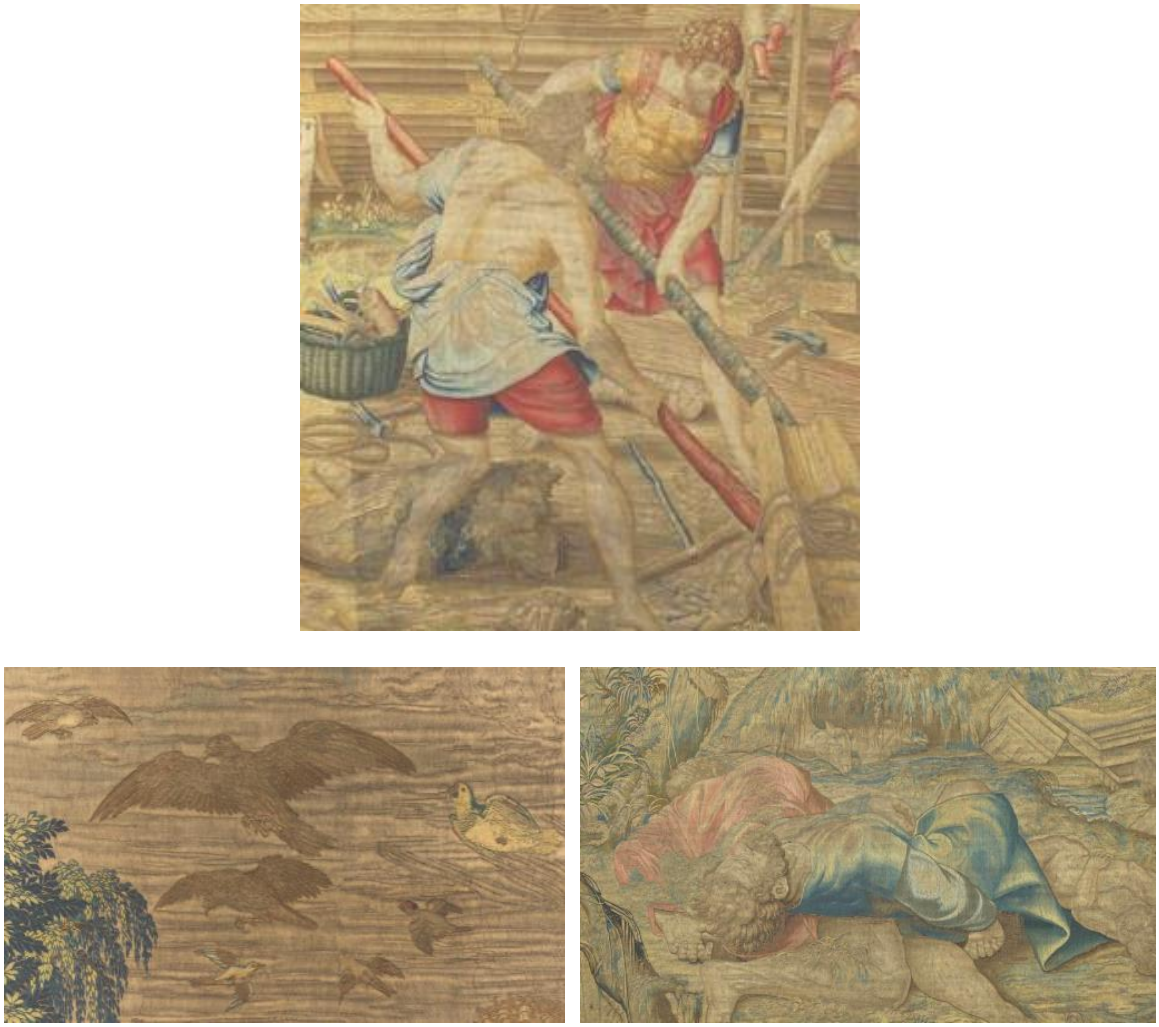

Fig. 30 Multisensory moments in *Genesis* based on Orzechowski's account. Top: *The Building of the Ark.* Bottom: *Adam Cultivates the Earth* and *The Animals Exit the Ark*,).

Moreover, Orzechowski collapses the boundaries between audience and object when he describes how the tapestries communicated directly with the viewer: *Paradise Bliss* "itself spoke of the serpent's temptation and Eve's sin," and caused both embarrassment and titillation among the guests at the sight of Adam and Eve's nudity.[382] Regarding the same tapestry (see Fig. 29):

> Fear could enrapture you at the sight of Adam's flight, Eve's trembling, and God the wrathful judge, so that, looking on, you would say that you, too, were condemned, and that a sentence had been proclaimed on you as well.[383]

[382] Ibid., 51.
[383] Ibid., 53.


Fig. 31 Adam and Eve's exile in *Paradise Bliss*.


Fig. 32 Sheltering from the storm in *The Flood*.

However, of all the tapestries, his recollection of *The Flood* is one of the most potent and evocative of *enargeia*: the skies "split with rain and a storm raging in the sky with lightning bolts," the onlookers "struck with fear," the "shameful flight" of the faithless a "sign of their guilty consciences," the tapestry as a whole "so full of confusion and so terrified the viewer, that he himself, struck with fear at such a horrible sight, feared for himself in the flood and longed for the Ark."[384]

Along the way, Orzechowski adds his own moral and theological glosses to the narrative, suggesting the didactic power of the tapestries even upon initial viewing. In the description of *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, Orzechowski makes direct reference to a didactic reading, referring to it as "the image that teaches us."[385] Specific examples of "teachings" can be found among Orzechowski's hermeneutic moments discussed in Chapter Three: the morals of *Cain Flees* ("the end for godless brethren is always sad"), the cautionary tale of *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* ("the evil crow lays evil eggs"), or his exhortation to Sigismund ("waking or sleeping, he is beholden to the King of Kings").

[384] Ibid., 54-55.
[385] Ibid., 53.

Elsewhere, regarding *God Converses with Noah*, Orzechowski describes God as "the avenger of evil and protector of good." His lengthiest tangent is his exegesis of the rainbow in *God Blesses Noah's Family* (Fig. 31): blue "retains our memory of the terrible Flood," white "prophesies that the Church will never be without the Cross [i.e. salvation]," and red, the "unending ray, shows us the eternal punishment awaiting the faithless."[386]

Fig. 33 The rainbow in *God Blesses Noah's Family*.

Furthermore, and perhaps most relevantly for Sigismund's image-creation, Orzechowski makes several direct connections between the magnificence of the tapestries, their moral content, and their patron. The strongest example of this is the opening to the *ekphrasis*, in which he declares: "I will present [the tapestries]...so that you will come to know not only the works of an outstanding artist, but also the mind and innate majesty of this greatest king, which can best be perceived through his commissions."[387] After completing the tour of the bedchamber, he reiterates that the hangings therein were "worthy of such a noble monarch." Finally, in his concluding paragraph, he states that the tapestries

[386] Ibid., 53-55.
[387] Ibid., 51.

"demonstrate the character and mind with which Sigismund Augustus has been blessed."[388] Therefore, in answer to the questions posed above, we find (based on Orzechowski's text) that the *enargeia* of the tapestries may indeed have strengthened their didactic potential, and may have primed the audience to absorb Sigismund's image of magnificence and morality through his artwork.

However, while Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* puts great emphasis on the immersiveness and lifelikeness of the tapestries, one thing it does not mention (but is quite apparent to the viewer) are the abstractions from reality throughout the series, another typical feature of mannerist art. For example, the aforementioned gigantism of the figures and the viewer's perspective of looking up at the scenes detract from the illusion of being "inside" the environments, walking among other human beings. In addition, although the tapestries covered the walls of the rooms almost entirely, floor to ceiling, the repetition of the characters throughout the series (and, in the case of *Paradise Bliss*, within the same hanging) would also have disrupted the 360-degree immersion. Taking these elements into consideration, one might object that this detracts from the *enargeic* potential and, consequently, from the didactic potential.

On the other hand, Marcia B. Hall and Marc Bayard both provide evidence suggesting that abstraction in art, especially with religious subject matter, does not necessarily lead to distraction from narrative or morals, or from a weakening of the affective potential. Hall connects mannerism with the idea of "making strange," a term from poetics which she applies to sixteenth century religious art. She compares it to Wöfflin's concept of High Renaissance ideality, which morphs the rational and natural to

[388] Ibid., 55.

represent the supernatural while never crossing the line into fantasy or irrationality. According to Hall, mannerist artists

> transgressed the limits of the plausible in the ways they organised space, in figure proportions, in their colour…Strangeness…was surely the bait that drew their viewers into further contemplation. In a visual culture that had come to expect to see a mildly modified natural world…these new pictures must have shocked and then enticed the viewer to linger.[389]

If anything, therefore, these abstract or unnatural elements may have led the viewer to spend more time with the image, encouraging further contemplation. Similarly, Bayard argues that the point-of-view of looking up at religious art did set the viewer at a distance from the scene, but did not exclude them from the immersive viewing experience. In fact, this distance was appropriate and necessary for contemplation of the supernatural and divine.[390]

In general, it would be an oversimplification to suggest that the unnatural elements of the tapestries detracted from their didactic potential. Their use of *enargeia* (in tandem with *energeia*) depended not on their lifelikeness but on their vividity. It was precisely their *enargeic* potential that played a significant role in their effectiveness, both as tributes to Sigismund's magnificence and as vehicles for his messages.

Still, in any discussion of the tapestries' lifelikeness or vividity, there is one more obvious feature that threatens to disrupt the immersion: that of the wide, ornate, fantastical borders. Designed in the fashionable Netherlandish grotesque style, they would have caught the viewers' eyes, fractured the illusion of immersion, and perhaps even distracted from the didactic content of the scenes they framed. Still, while the borders may appear at first

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[389] Marcia B. Hall, *The Sacred Image in the Age of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 246.
[390] Bayard, "In Front of the Work of Art," 271.

glance to ground the tapestries in the realm of artifice and decoration, it is necessary to take a closer look at how they may have interplayed with the narrative, thereby both complicating and supporting the tapestries' didactic content.

4.4. Deciphering the Grotesque

A helpful model for understanding the function of style in *Genesis* may be to look at the "rhetoric" of tapestry. The narrative and affective content of the series (discussed in Chapter Four and previous sections of this chapter) could be mapped on to the *logos* and *pathos* of the series, respectively. What remains, then, is the *ethos*, the establishment of the authority and suitability of the rhetoric. If the tapestry is the rhetor, then style is the *ethos*. For the centrepiece scenes, the *ethos* is mannerism. As we have seen, this was an appropriate style for princely art extolling power, magnificence, monumentalism, and supernatural themes. For the borders, the *ethos* is the grotesque. Just like mannerism, the grotesque is a highly appropriate mode of storytelling, both in terms of the biblical content it frames and the courtly context in which it was displayed. The grotesque simultaneously underlines the magnificence of the Genesis stories and of the ruler.

The grotesque (*grottesche*) itself emerged as a style out of Italy, inspired by the frescoes discovered during excavations of the Domus Aurea in Rome in the late fifteenth century. Generally speaking, the grotesque denoted stylised designs mixing flora and fauna, human figures, geometric elements, and mythological creatures, and featuring an interplay between the realistic and fantastic. The grotesque blended beauty with the monstrous, bizarre, or absurd, and often featured elements of hybridity or metamorphosis.[391]

[391] Frances Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings* (Berlin: Mouton, 1971), 17-18, 24; Chris Askholt Hammeken and Maria Fabricius Hansen, "Introduction," in *Ornament and Monstrosity in Early Modern Art*, ed. Chris Askholt Hammeken and Maria Fabricius Hansen, 13-43 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 13; Ethan Matt Kavaler, "Ornament and Systems of Ordering in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands," *Renaissance Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (2019): 1300.

The first major use of the grotesque outside of Italy was in the galleries at Fontainebleau, painted by Rosso Fiorentino and Francesco Primaticcio, inspired by classical works such as *The Iliad* and *Metamorphoses*.[392] Netherlandish grotesque emerged around 1540, propelled by the works of Cornelis Bos and Cornelis Floris.[393] Stylistically, Netherlandish grotesque tended to be busier than Italian grotesque, while maintaining order and harmony through complex strapwork which seemed to "imprison" the figures.[394] Its themes were typically mythological and fantastical, often with a touch of the exotic through allusions to the New World. The depictions of creatures and plants oscillated between meticulous realism and unfettered fantasy.[395]

The *Genesis* borders are a prime example of Netherlandish grotesque (Fig. 32, 33, 34). The core elements are typical of the style, including satyrs, putti, cornucopiae, exotic birds and fruits, figures imprisoned in strapwork, and mythical deities. Throughout the series, they feature a menagerie of fantastical chimeric creatures, including a beast with two bodies and one head, a small one-horned mammal, a duck-billed sea creature, and a many-legged turtle. The theme of creation and metamorphosis is echoed in the figures being "birthed" from horns within the strapwork. In addition, several of the hallmarks of Cornelius Floris's designs are present, including feathered headdresses on many of the human figures, and strings with tassels.[396]

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[392] Barasch, *Grotesque*, 22
[393] Sune Schele, *Cornelius Bos*: *A Study of the Origins of Netherlandish Grotesque* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1965), 38.
[394] Schele, *Cornelius Bos*, 79
[395] Paulina Kluz, "From Ornament of Late Antiquity to Netherlandish Grotesque," Małopolska Virtual Museums, https://muzea.malopolska.pl/en/articles/460 (accessed August 11, 2021).
[396] Schele, *Cornelius Bos*, 49, 79.

Fig. 34 The borders in *Paradise Bliss*.

Fig. 35 Some fantastical creatures in the *Genesis* borders (from *Paradise Bliss*).

Fig. 36 Cornucopiae, satyrs, putti, exotic birds, and bodies in strapwork from *Paradise Bliss* (first three) and *The Building of the Ark* (last).

In mid-sixteenth century Kraków, Netherlandish grotesque would have been a fairly novel artistic style, strongly associated as a staple of its region of origin. The *Genesis* series was one of the first (and certainly preeminent) injections of Netherlandish grotesque into the royal court. It was preceded only by the grotesques (mostly verdure and mythological figures) in the Sigismund Chapel (Fig. 35), although these are an example of Italian grotesque and lack the notable strapwork of the Netherlandish school. There is also the case of the renowned Renaissance palace of Prince Jerzy II in Brzeg, which featured a gate with floral and geometric motifs, real and fantastical animals, and mythological scenes. These grotesques are more closely inspired by the Netherlandish style; however, although

construction on the castle began in 1541, it only finished in 1560, meaning that viewers of *Genesis* would likely not have had a chance to see the Brzeg grotesques by 1553.[397]

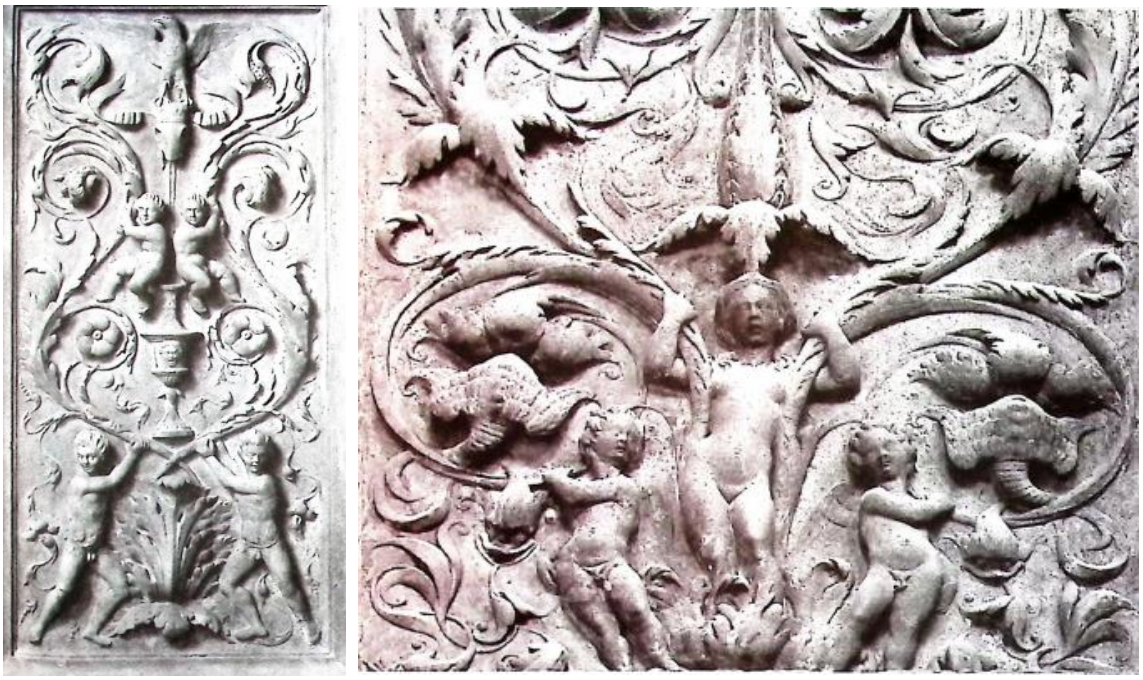

Fig. 37 Grotesque reliefs from the Sigismund Chapel, c. 1531. Kraków, Bazylika Archikatedralna św. Stanisława i św. Wacława.

At the same time, the style was becoming increasingly popular at courts across the continent. Therefore, for contemporary viewers, it simultaneously signified foreignness (specifically, Flemishness), fashionability, wealth, and magnificence. In this way, it was a perfect marriage to the mannerism of the centrepieces: another style representative of foreign artistic prowess, cultural acumen, courtly art, and power.

Before beginning a stylistic analysis of the borders, it is important to note that the function of ornament in the early modern period was different from our current paradigms. Ornament in art was not deemed marginal or superfluous, a mere visual embellishment or addendum, but rather a core piece of the artwork as a whole that was praised and valued by artists and collectors alike.[398] One of the most influential voices in this regard was Alberti,

[397] Kozakiewicz, *Renesans i manieryzm*, 98.
[398] Hammeken and Hansen, "Introduction," 16.

who gives ornament a central role in *De re aedificatoria* (1485). Moving away from the classical aesthetic paradigms of Vitruvius and Horace, who believed that ornament should only serve the "argument" of a design and never overtake the focus, Alberti claimed that ornament is the crown of an architectural design, and that cosmic order can only be achieved through the addition of ornament.[399] Therefore, a sixteenth-century patron such as Sigismund would have expected the artist to use grotesque to support, not disrupt, the main artwork, creating a visually and narratively cohesive whole.

This notion of ornament as a part of a whole detracts from the idea that the tapestry borders were obvious impediments to immersion and *enargeia*. Of course, the florid grotesque borders do form a clear demarcation between the narrative scenes. Moreover, unlike the borders of the Sistine Chapel tapestries, which were made to resemble bronze reliefs framing the scenes, the *Genesis* borders do not attempt to blur the line between materials, or between the artworks and the room around them.[400] Thus, while walking past the tapestries, the viewer would face regular reminders that they were, in fact, viewing separate works of art, and not one continuous mural. The immersion into the world of *Genesis* would have been fractured. This may have been compounded by the presence of furniture in the rooms, blurring the lines between reality and illusion. In this sense, it is perhaps more accurate to refer to the space created by the tapestries at their unveiling as a kind of liminal space between sixteenth-century Kraków and the Old Testament, a semi-immersive experience still grounded in the framework of a display of art.

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[399] Frances S. Connelly, "Unwinding the Arabesque: Grotesque Ornament and Modern Meaning," in *Paradigms of Renaissance Grotesques*, ed. Damiano Acciarino, 241-263 (Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2019), 242; Hammeken and Hansen, "Introduction," 17.

[400] Lisa Pon, "Raphael's Acts of the Apostles Tapestries for Leo X: Sight, Sound, and Space in the Sistine Chapel," *The Art Bulletin* 97, no. 4 (2015): 392.

On the other hand, the borders continue, and even enhance, many of the stylistic effects and thematic elements of the overall tapestry series. According to Chris Askholt Hammeken (borrowing Kantian and Derridan terms), this posits the relationship between the tapestries and their borders as that of *ergon* (centrepiece) and *parergon* (framework). The references between border and central scene means that there is no definite demarcation between the *parergon* and the *ergon*. Rather, the *parergon* is part of the entire piece which makes it whole and contributes to its overall meaning and affect.[401] Thus, as Hammeken summarises, the physical frame "evaporates inasmuch as ornament partakes of the subject matter…Centre and periphery cannot be separated from one another but are continually entangled in unstable relations."[402]

How, then, do the *Genesis* borders interface with the centrepieces? Firstly, the grotesque designs reflect several of the mannerist facets that are so evident in the figural scenes, most notably their play on exaggerated movement and human(oid) physicality, complexity in composition, and uncanny plays on scale and proportion (especially in bodies) combined with structures of statuesque control (especially in the strapwork, see Fig. 36).[403] In fact, the grotesque borders can be seen as a reflection of the order versus chaos theme throughout the series. The fantastical, chimeric creatures defy logical comprehension, while the strapwork very literally keeps them in order. As Clare Guest writes of common sixteenth century conceptions of the grotesque, the "symphonic organisation" prevailed over their "chaotic tendencies."[404]

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[401] Kaveler, "Ornament," 1313, Hammeken and Hansen, "Introduction," 13.
[402] Ibid., 19.
[403] All of these are common features of the grotesque, per Hammeken and Hansen, *Ornament*, 13, 21.
[404] Clare Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 553.

Fig. 38 Imprisoned bodies in the *Paradise Bliss* border.

However, while the "chaotic" elements of the borders do tie into this meta-theme, here we are faced with a different version of chaos. Unlike another prominent use of grotesque in princely image-creation, the mantelpiece of the Brugse Vrije (1528-1531) dedicated to Charles V, the grotesques of the *Genesis* borders do not convey a monstrous threat invading the order of the centre. The borders are kept in strict boundaries, and the figures within them are imprisoned within strapwork in the typical style of Floris and Bos. As a result, Sigismund would have been able to tap into the multisensory feast of ornament to project his magnificence, without losing control over the central themes of the commission.

In the case of the *Genesis* borders, chaos is not discord (as in the centrepieces of *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* or *The Flood*) but copia, fertility, worldliness. This is chaos in a much more positive and fruitful sense, the kind that can benefit a ruler and enhance his magnificence by projecting an image of control over "wild" elements, especially those which produce bounty and prosperity. This could also be read as a nod toward two of the protagonists of the *Genesis* series, Adam the Gardener and Noah the Vintner, both of whom cultivated and held sway over wild nature.

Furthermore, grotesque ornament is a fertile ground for *enargeia*. This ties into classical rhetorical concepts of ornament by Cicero and Quintillian, who believed that

ornament was necessary to give vividity and power to oratory and art. Rhetorical ornament thus enhanced the subject, brought it to life for the audience, and made it more emotionally persuasive or immediate.[405] Crucially, among the rhetorical ornaments, Quintillian lists *enargeia*, because illustration "is something more than mere clearness, since the latter merely lets itself be seen, whereas the former thrusts itself upon our notice."[406]

Secondly, the very nature of the grotesque ties it to one of the main themes of the *Genesis* series: creation. According to Hammeken and Hansen, one of the main tenets of grotesque ornament is a focus on hybridity, metamorphosis, and "wild, unruly displays of continual genesis."[407] As Clare Guest argues, Renaissance grotesques' metamorphic imagery, "prolific capacity for extension," and sinuous lines conjure a force of continuous generation, depicting "change without end."[408] Further support for the links between ornament and genesis can be found in classical Greek rhetoric, especially in the ordering of *kosmos* in decorative yet defined compositions with clear limits and contrasts.[409] In *Timaeus*, Plato sees ornament as the perfect beauty of the demiurgic creation of the world from the four elements. We find these notions of creation-as-ornament echoed in mediaeval commentaries on Genesis. God created the world *ex nihilo*, progressively adorning it throughout the six "days" by giving matter substantial form. This was commonly referred to by mediaeval exegesists as *ornatus mundi* or *exornatio mundi*, the "adornment" of the world.[410]

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[405] Hammeken and Hansen, "Introduction," 18.
[406] Cited in Ibid., 22.
[407] Ibid., 13
[408] Guest, *Understanding of Ornament*, 534, 570.
[409] As Hammeken, Hansen, and Guest point out, this is reflected in the common etymology between *kosmos* (cosmos) and *kosmetikos* (cosmetic). See e.g. Kavaler, "Ornament," 1276.
[410] Hammeken and Hansen, "Introduction," 17, see also Chapter One in Guest, *Understanding of Ornament.*

Thirdly, the grotesque frames of the tapestries help to create a space of metamorphosis and transition, both stylistically and, perhaps, ideologically. As explained by Hammeken and Hansen, Kant established that the *parergon* is not its own separate entity, but an amalgam of what is outside (the frame) and inside (the centrepiece).[411] Ornament used as a framing device, such as the *Genesis* borders, functions as a mediator between the viewer's "real" space and the world of the image.[412] Moreover, the grotesque's focus on hybridity and metamorphosis makes it an ideal style for a space of transition such as a frame.[413] In other words, the *Genesis* borders are loaded with transitional and metamorphic potential. As mentioned previously, the borders' complication of the immersive potential of the tapestries transforms the series into a kind of liminal space between the real world and the figural scenes, and the grotesque images within the borders only further this creation of liminal space. They open up the potential for the tapestries to be a realm of individual meaning-making, which can blur the lines between reality and fantasy, past and present, sacred and profane. Thus, similarly to the *enargeic* content of the tapestries, the transitional and metamorphic nature of the borders may encourage closer interpretive interaction between the viewer and the artwork, thereby supporting the series' primary function as a conduit for Sigismund's messages.

Fourthly, the *Genesis* borders support the series' main content by enhancing the magnificence of the overall tapestry series–and, by proxy, its owner. As Alison Wright argues of framework for Renaissance religious art, the honour of a sacred image is significantly bolstered by an appropriately majestic frame, and this magnificence is then

411 Hammeken and Hansen, "Introduction," 13.
412 Ibid., 19.
413 Luke Morgan, "Dissonant Symphonies: The Villa d'Este in Tivoli and the Grotesque, in *Ornament and Monstrosity*, 74.

reflected back on the patron.[414] Accordingly, the *Genesis* borders literally frame the central scenes in visual signifiers of magnificence: the fashionable elite style of Netherlandish grotesque, the Greco-Roman deities, and an abundance of beauty, all woven in sumptuous detail and interwoven with golden thread. In Ernst Gombrich's words, "the richer the elements of the frame, the more the centre will gain in dignity."[415]

However, it is important to note that the grotesque elements of the tapestries are kept in order by the clearly-demarcated borders. In this way, the borders abide by Cicero and Quintillian's instructions on ornament: both warn against an overuse of ornament, as it could exert a sensual allure that might subvert traditions, threaten harmony, disrupt logical argument, and even obscure societal norms.[416] Indeed, the debate over the decadence or moral corruption of borders was potent during the Renaissance, and the catalyst for the defence of ornament by Alberti, among others.[417]

At first glance, explicitly confined to the frame with no overlap into the centrepiece, the fantastical and absurd elements of the *Genesis* borders do not threaten to destabilise the harmony of the whole, or overshadow the images and messages of the central iconography. In this sense, the *Genesis* series abides by a fairly conservative relationship between argument (here, the central scenes) and ornament, as outlined by Frances Connelly, in which ornament supports but is subservient to argument.[418] At the same time, it might be an oversimplification to dismiss the power of the tapestries' borders to challenge meanings and messages. As Hammeken posits, ornament by its nature

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[414] Alison Wright, *Frame Work: Honour and Ornament in Italian Renaissance Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 32.
[415] E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 225.
[416] Hammeken and Hansen, "Introduction," 18.
[417] Morgan, "Dissonant Symphonies," 77.
[418] Frances Connelly, "Ornament and Agency: Pico's Poetic Monsters," in *Ornament and Monstrosity*, 223.

> endangers argument and casts doubt upon accepted truths and values…The love of complex, labyrinthine, and enigmatic layers of meaning fluctuates continuously in bizarre metamorphoses, emphasising the relativism of vision and the cruciality of paradox in regard to perception.[419]

In fact, this is one of the great threats posed by the grotesque in the view of Horace and Vitruvius. According to the former, ornament is a "sick man's fever dream" that becomes a monster, a category-breaker eliding difference, precisely when it claims the right to speak.[420]

Arguably, the framing of sacred scenes in profane ornament could open up the door for non-theological interpretation of the tapestries. Secular ornament literally separates the biblical scenes and prevents the religious themes from forming a unified whole and from overtaking the secular chambers of Wawel Castle. The tapestries, therefore, are unable to create a fully and dominantly sacred space, or to fully overshadow the presence of the patron in his own residence. As a result, the political context of the artworks is able to permeate. Naturally, the theological and moral content is given a privileged place by virtue of its visual centrality. However, in a viewing context where the framing device highlights secular magnificence, and thus the person of the prince, politics and image-creation are able to share the stage with exegetical commentary.

The final question that arises regarding the *Genesis* borders is the extent to which we may mine them for iconographic meaning. Here, it is important to note that the idea of symbolically-charged grotesques was not entirely without precedent in the sixteenth century; one of the more notable works on the subject was published in the same years as the tapestries' unveiling: Pirro Ligorio's *Libro dell'antichità di Roma* (1553). Ligorio's

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[419] Hammeken and Hansen, "Introduction," 24.
[420] Connelly, "Unwinding the Arabesque," 243.

theory posits that "the grotesque pictures of the pagans are not without meaning and are contrived with some fine philosophical skill and depicted poetically."[421] For Ligorio, grotesque was not just ornament but a pictographic language which begged to be deciphered. Crucially, Ligorio goes beyond identifying more obvious symbols (e.g. personifications of the continents, Greco-Roman deities) to find more arcane references based on hieroglyphs and emblems, from which moral messages could be drawn.[422]

Because the primary function of the *Genesis* borders is ornamental, it would be remiss to overstate their symbolic importance. The greatest concern for the artists (and the patron) would have been their overall impact as ornate frames invoking magnificence, and whether they complemented the centrepieces in colour scheme and composition. It is also unlikely that Sigismund would have had much input into the actual content of the borders aside from their general style. As we saw in Philip II's contract, the overall aesthetics of the borders were certainly a concern for patrons, but this would not have extended to the minutia within them. This would have been the purview of the border artists, who themselves relied on established patterns available on the market. In the case of *Genesis*, these were patterns based on the works of Floris and Bos. In other words, there would not have been much deviation on the part of the artists or the patron from these models. Moreover, because Netherlandish grotesque would have been fairly novel in Poland at the time, their "strangeness" would have been enhanced even more so than in their native Flemish context, thereby making symbolic analysis even more opaque.

Lacking any supporting evidence (including from Orzechowski, who does not mention the borders), it is impossible to state definitively whether or not any viewers of the

[421] Cited in Morgan, "Dissonant Symphonies," 76. Among examples of sixteenth-century grotesques with intentional symbolism, Morgan lists Il Sodoma's *grottesche* for the abbey at Monte Oliveto Maggiore in Asciano (1505-1508). Ibid., 81.
[422] Ibid., 82-83.

Genesis tapestries at Wawel would have searched for or found hidden symbols in the borders in the vein of Ligorio, or whether any of these were planted intentionally by the artists (or Sigismund). For our purposes, therefore, it is more expedient to focus on a few instances of explicit symbolism in the borders which comment directly on the centrepieces' stories.[423]

Depending on how closely one observed the tapestries (again, whether or not this would have been possible at the unveiling itself is debatable), these figures stand out thanks to their privileged position in respect to the viewer (the bottom centre of the borders) and their size relative to other figures in the bottom border. Moreover, they are the only deviations from a border design that is otherwise fairly uniform across the fifteen extant tapestries.

Some of the symbolic figures are quite transparent commentaries on the main action of the centrepieces. For example, several of the Noah borders feature recurring allusions to water deities, including Neptune and Amphitrite (Fig. 37) and a river god (Fig. 38), potentially the personification of the Tiber (*The Building of the Ark*, *The Animals Enter the Ark*, and *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*).[424] *The Flood*, *The Animals Exit the Ark*, and *God Blesses Noah's Family* feature women holding parrots, likely based on ubiquitous emblems of the New World. Combined with the abundance of tropical birds (especially parrots), fruits, and flowers throughout, there is a notable motif of exoticism and the wonders of natural history throughout.[425] *Noah's Drunkenness* includes Dionysus and Ceres (Fig. 39),

[423] This would, in fact, be in accordance with the work of other tapestry scholars on potential border symbolism. For example, Edith Standen argues that the personifications of virtues, elements, seasons, and hours in the borders of Raphael's Sistine Chapel tapestries were conspicuous enough in their adherence to ubiquitous emblems to be legible to a sixteenth-century viewer. Standen, "Some Sixteenth Century Flemish Tapestries Related to Raphael's Workshop," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 4 (1971): 120.
[424] Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 108.
[425] The associations between the story of Noah and the frenzy for natural history and New World exploration has been well-documented, including in the case of Philip II, who ordered a copy of the Noah set around 1562. Buchanan, "Contract," 414.

and *Cain Kills Abel* includes male and female figures in repose, presumably personifications of death (Fig. 40).[426] Afterward, *Cain Flees the Wrath of God* features several pairs of nude athletes writhing in combat, perhaps an allusion to the violent death of Abel or to Cain's spiritual struggle after his sin. In these instances, we may have examples of the *parergon* challenging the supremacy of the *ergon* by claiming the power to speak, although this power complements rather than contradicts the messages therein.

Fig. 39 Neptune and Amphitrite in *The Building of the Ark*'s border.

Fig. 40 The river god in *The Building of the Ark*'s border.

Fig. 41 Dionysius and Ceres in *Noah's Drunkenness*.

[426] Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 148, 92.

Fig. 42 Personifications of death(?) in *Cain Kills Abel*.

Fig. 43 Neptune and Minerva in the corners of *Paradise Bliss*.

One of the clearest personifications in the borders is the recurrence of Minerva and Neptune in the bottom left and right corners of each tapestry (Fig. 41), although their significance is one of the most oblique. These are the two largest figures in any of the borders, and their canonical attributes make them almost immediately recognisable. It is tempting to interpret these as references to Sigismund and his wife, the two intended recipients of the commission. However, we have no extant sources prior to 1553 comparing Sigismund to Neptune or either Barbara or Catherine to Minerva. Otherwise, if the placement of these specific gods is intentional, not purely aesthetic, then Neptune may be

another reference to water imagery from the Noahic Flood. Additionally, according to Luba Freedman, Neptune was often used by Renaissance artists as a metonym of ancient rulers, inspired by the famous "Quos ego" passage from the *Aeneid.* Thus, many depictions of Neptune in static poses carried an "imperative character." When used in princely imagery such as numismata, "static Neptunes" could be an attempt to tap into a classical imperial visual lexicon.[427] The Neptune in the *Genesis* borders is an example of a "static Neptune," seated in a chariot and blowing a conch shell. It is possible, therefore, that he could have been read as a general personification of royal power.

Minerva is more of a conundrum, although she can be read as a general composite of princely virtues sprinkled throughout the series (wisdom, justice, learning, military acumen, patronage of the arts, etc.). A final option is an allusion to the myth of Athena and Poseidon's fight over the city of Athens, described in *Metamorphoses*. Poseidon gifted Athens water, which they did not need as they were close to rivers and the sea. Athena gave an olive tree, which gave the people timber, olive oil, and nutritious fruits. One piece of evidence supporting this interpretation is a sketch of the fight between Athena and Poseidon (1540-1545) by Antonio Fantuzzi or Fiorentino Rosso for the grotesques at Fontainebleau, meaning that this may have been a recurring story within the grotesque canon.[428]

Some of the other deviations from the border patterns could be interpreted either as iconographic or aesthetic choices on the part of the artists. For example, there is a running theme of family throughout the Adam and Eve and Noah tapestries (Fig 42). The border of

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[427] Luba Freedman, "Neptune in Classical and Renaissance Visual Art," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 2, no. 2 (1995): 231-233.

[428] Antonio Fantuzzi or Fiorentino Rosso," The Dispute Between Neptune and Athena," print, 26.2 x 41 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, USA, https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-dispute-between-neptune-and-athena-antonio-fantuzzi-rosso-fiorentino/fQE3e26REpMjWA?hl=en (accessed April 17, 2024). Victor Kommerell has argued for the importance of *Metamorphoses* as a foundational text for grotesque iconography in *Metamorphosed Margins: The Case for a Visual Rhetoric of the Renaissance 'Grottesche' under the Influence of Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag AG, 2008).

Paradise Bliss includes a family with two babies, the mother breastfeeding one of them. In the next tapestry, *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, we find an image of the disruption of marriage and family: Cupid arranging an adulterous rendezvous between Venus and Mars.[429] This trio reappears in the next tapestry (*Abel's Sacrifice*) as well as *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, both depicting consequences of the First Parents' fall. However, the next scene (*God Converses with Noah*) offers a fresh start to salvation history through Noah, along with a reemergence of a more traditional family motif in the border (a nymph, faun, and child), which also appears in *The Animals Exit the Ark*.

Fig. 44 The progression of the family motif: *Paradise Bliss*, *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, and *God Converses with Noah*.

[429] Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 78.

It is possible that these familial motifs are entirely coincidental: indeed, personifications of the gods or other mythical creatures were a stylistic staple of the grotesque with no inherent symbolic significance. On the other hand, the specific placement of these families within the series's narrative raises the question of intentionality. It is possible that the borders were meant to evoke themes of marriage, fertility, and family, which would have been appropriate for tapestries intended for a young king with dynastic ambitions and his new bride.[430]

Again, lacking any discussion of the borders in the primary literature, be it their commissioning, design, or reception, there is no way of definitively arguing for or against their intentionality. We also have no definitive proof that the viewers would have paid close attention to the borders, or even have been able to see them clearly at the veiling. All this, therefore, remains a matter of speculation. In keeping with the liminal nature of their style, the grotesques offer a multiplicity of potential associations, but not necessarily any clear answers or master narrative.[431]

However, there is one minor reference in Orzechowski's panegyric that may indicate that he did notice the borders. After the unveiling of the tapestries, he compares Catherine "not to Venus, infamous for her relations with Mars, but with Minerva herself, highly exalted for her virtue," who "surpassed Venus's beauty in Paris's estimation."[432] This is an interesting gloss, perhaps spurred by the fact that Catherine was, according to contemporary reports, unattractive and considerably overweight, and thus Orzechowski tactfully decided to focus on her inner attributes instead. That said, it is suspiciously

[430] It is important to restate that these tapestries were likely commissioned with the intention of being used for the coronation or state wedding of Sigismund and Barbara before her unexpected death, not for Sigismund and Catherine's wedding, but the focus on marriage and childbirth still holds.
[431] Connelly, "Unwinding the Arabesque," 243.
[432] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Dzieła,* 115.

coincidental that Orzechowski would reference not one but two instances of fairly explicit symbolism in the borders, both of which repeat throughout the series. If this is indeed "proof" that the guests could and did examine the borders, then this may also suggest that the artists placed these figures in the borders to comment on the centrepieces or on the circumstances of the commission, not only as generic staples of grotesque. Nevertheless, the layers of speculation needed to make this claim, and the lack of evidence to substantiate it, means that any symbolic reading of the *Genesis* borders must be treated as ambiguous both in intentionality and reception. It is perhaps better to view the grotesques as "ornament with flourishes of argument," in Frances Connelly's words, rather than usurpers of the centrepieces' power of speech.[433]

4.5. Conclusion

The materiality and style of the *Genesis* tapestries are crucial to understanding the series. Orzechowski suggests as much in his *ekphrasis*, and his insight reflects this thesis's analysis. The tapestries' agentive physical materials combined with mannerist elements, especially the dichotomy between order and chaos and the dominant presence of *enargeia*, bolster the themes conveyed by the figural scenes. Even in light of their overwhelming affective power, the didactic potential of the tapestries remains a focal point. In fact, as in the case of *enargeia*, their affect may support their arguments. Orzechowski's observation that the tapestries are "images that teach" is not muddied by their stylistic complexity or grandeur. Meanwhile, the borders, which initially appear at odds with the didactic and immersive aims of the centrepieces, use Netherlandish grotesque to bolster and comment on the centrepieces, interfacing both stylistically and narratively with the series as a whole.

[433] Connelly, "Unwinding the Arabesque," 244.

The visuals of *Genesis* may have been the first element to capture the viewer's attention simply due to their splendour, intricacy, and novelty in the context of the Polish court. However, as this chapter has argued, the potential for the images to overwhelm the didactic content are kept at bay through the composition of the artworks. Thus, we must see the style as working in tandem with the series' narrative, as one should expect from mid-sixteenth century art.

With this in mind, we can peel back the next layer of a close reading of the tapestries: that of the biblical stories and characters they present, and the implications of these for Sigismund's image and agenda.