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**Nov. 25, 2014**

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## **Rarely-Exhibited Eighteenth-Century Tapestries on View While Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art Completes Renovation**

The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art will display rarely-exhibited tapestries from the eighteenth century in its soaring Morgan Great Hall during the final phase of the museum's five-year, \$33 million renovation. The large, intricate tapestries—which depict the saga of Greek hero Jason—will be on view Nov. 28, 2014, through April 2015, at which point the Great Hall will be transformed in preparation for the Sept. 19, 2015, grand reopening of the Morgan Memorial Building.

The Jason Tapestries are enormous in size—ranging in height up to 14 feet, and in width up to 24 feet—presenting a challenge for curators in exhibiting them on a regular basis.

“The sheer magnitude of these stunning woven treasures, when paired with their fragility, prevents the museum from showing them as frequently as we would wish,” said Susan L. Talbott, Director and C.E.O. “The changing of the guard in our magnificent Morgan Great Hall presented us an ideal window in which to share these masterpieces with our visitors, and it is our hope that everyone will take advantage of this marvelous opportunity.”

The Jason Tapestries series was donated to the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1946. It consists of four tapestries from an original set of seven, which narrates the saga of Jason, well known to French contemporaries through the book *Metamorphosis* by Ovid. The tapestries depict Jason's voyage with the Argonauts, the capture of the Golden Fleece (a symbol of kingship), and their subsequent return to Greece. Jason appears as a tragic hero—youthful, brave and clever—whose entanglement with the sorceress Medea will assure him the Fleece, but will also lead to the annihilation of his family.

From the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries—the great period of tapestry weaving—popes, kings, and aristocrats alike competed for these luxurious pieces. Much more labor-

intensive and expensive to produce than paintings and sculpture, tapestries served as portable sources of wealth, and were given as precious diplomatic gifts. Manufactories used the finest materials, such as silk threads that were often combined with silver and gold. The mythological (or historical and biblical) narratives depicted were often used to glorify heroic acts of the past and present.

The story of Jason was one of the most popular tales to illustrate in tapestries of the late eighteenth century, the time of the Ancien Régime in France. In 1743, King Louis XV commissioned a seven-part Jason and Medea series for the Throne Room at Versailles, arguably the most prestigious room in France. Jean François de Troy (1679–1752) provided sketches that were later translated into life-size preparatory drawings and subsequently woven into tapestries at the Gobelins workshop. Other versions of this series were given as precious gifts by the French crown, and today belong to the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, the Royal Collections in Sweden, the Palazzo Reale in Milan and Windsor Castle in England, among others.

### **About Morgan Great Hall**

Hartford native J. Pierpont Morgan, one of America's richest men and greatest art collectors during the Gilded Age, donated the land and money to build the Beaux-arts Morgan Memorial. He also had a special interest in tapestries, and when the Great Hall opened in 1915, he loaned ten of them to adorn its walls. The space soon became known as "Tapestry Hall." Morgan and his contemporaries saw themselves as the offspring of the old European aristocracy, who hung tapestries in the Great Halls of their country houses to demonstrate their power and influence, as well as to keep out the cold. The Wadsworth Atheneum will celebrate the centennial of the Morgan Memorial and its Great Hall in 2015; following the exhibition of The Jason Tapestries, Morgan Great Hall will be installed with masterworks from the museum's permanent collection of European art, to open Sept. 19, 2015, as part of the unveiling of the restored building.

### **Exhibition Credit**

The Jason Tapestries installation is generously funded by David and Mary Dangremond in memory of Leicester and Mary Plant Faust. Support for the Wadsworth Atheneum is provided in part by the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign and the Department of Economic and Community Development, which also receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

## **About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art**

Founded in 1842, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is the oldest public art museum in the United States. The museum's nearly 50,000 works of art span 5,000 years, from Greek and Roman antiquities to the first museum collection of American contemporary art. The museum's five connected buildings—representing architectural styles from Gothic Revival to modern International Style—are located at 600 Main Street in Hartford, Conn. Since 2010 the museum has been undergoing a major, \$33 million renovation, slated to be complete 2015. Hours: Wed – Fri: 11 a.m. – 5 p.m.; Sat and Sun: 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.; First Thursdays: 11 a.m. – 8 p.m. Admission: \$5 – 10; discounts for members, students and seniors. Phone: (860) 278-2670; website: <http://thewadsworth.org>.

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