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The Martyrdom of Saint Barbara
Flemish tapestry, probably Bruges, circa 1525-1550
Wool and silk
270 x 198 cm

The Flemish tapestry depicting the Martyrdom of Saint Barbara stands out as a remarkable example of 16th-century craftsmanship, distinguished by its exceptionally well-preserved color palette. The vibrant brick reds and striking bluish-green leaves create a stunning visual impact, showcasing the artistry of its creators and the outstanding state of conservation.

Professor Guy Delmarcel links this tapestry to a series of textiles produced in Bruges after 1530, characterized by their fantastical nature scenes and populated by imaginative creatures. This tapestry exemplifies the rich decorative style of the time, merging naturalistic and poetic elements with exotic animals that spark the imagination.

Bruges was a preeminent weaving center during this period, with numerous tapestries

documented in contemporary inventories. However, very few have survived, making this piece particularly rare and valuable. Notable examples include two millefleurs tapestries featuring the arms of Paolo Giovio, found in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Princes of Liechtenstein in Vaduz. The absence of the town mark on our tapestry indicates that it was woven before May 2, 1547, when the guild mandated its use, further enhancing its historical significance.

The exquisite craftsmanship of Bruges tapestries, such as this one, has left a lasting impact on textile production throughout Europe, establishing high standards of artistic innovation and technical skill that subsequent generations would aspire to emulate.

Particularly striking is the intricate border design, adorned with floral motifs and goldsmith-inspired elements like incense burners and small bells against a warm brick-red background. This style, often associated with heraldic imagery, can be traced back to Bruges around 1530, underscoring the tapestry's connection to the city's rich artistic heritage.

The dramatic depiction of the executioner brandishing a curved sabre serves as a powerful reminder of the historical context of the time, reflecting the Ottoman incursions into Central Europe. This detail not only situates the tapestry within a specific moment in history but also aids in dating it to the second quarter of the 16th century.

In summary, this tapestry is not just a work of art; it is a rare and significant artifact from Bruges, showcasing an extraordinary preservation of color and design that captures the essence of its era.