



The Lost Tapestries of the City of Ladies: Christine de Pizan's Renaissance Legacy

Susan Groag Bell

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Like a particularly good detective story, this richly textured book follows tantalizing clues in its hunt for a group of missing artistic masterpieces. Susan Bell recounts both her long search for a series of sixteenth-century tapestries that celebrated women and her efforts to understand their meaning for Queen Elizabeth I of England and the other powerful women who owned them. Opening a new window on the lives of noblewomen in the Renaissance, the brilliantly colored tapestries that were the ultimate artistic luxury of the day, and the popular and influential fourteenth-century writer Christine de Pizan, Bell pursues a compelling tale that moves from centuries past to today.

The tapestries around which this story revolves are linked to Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), originally published six hundred years ago in 1405. The book is a tribute to women that honors two hundred female warriors, scientists, queens, philosophers, and builders of cities. Though twenty-five manuscripts of the *City of Ladies* still exist, references to tapestries based on the book are elusive. Bell takes us along as she tracks down records of six sets of tapestries whose owners included Elizabeth I of England; Margaret of Austria; and Anne of Brittany, Queen of France. Bell examines the intriguing details of these women's lives—their arranged marriages, their power, their affairs of state—asking what interest they had in owning these particular tapestries. Could the tapestries have represented their thinking? As she reveals the historical, linguistic, and cultural aspects of this unique story, Bell also gives a fascinating account of medieval and early-Renaissance tapestry production and of Christine de Pizan's remarkable life and legacy.

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