Soft Res Publica: On the Assembly and Disassembly of Courtly Space

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In the spring of 1621 the office of the Works at Whitehall, the main London palace of James I, prepared “the Banketting house with the History of Abraham for the king to take view of them.” References to this performance have surfaced sporadically in theater histories, but no known play text exists. As John Astington has demonstrated, what the king viewed was not in fact a play but rather a suite of tapestries: ten panels illustrating the life of Abraham, first acquired by Henry VIII in 1543/44.¹ The most valuable of all of Henry’s woven acquisitions, the History of Abraham set was purchased for the Great Hall at Hampton Court Palace but occasionally traveled to other royal sites, including coronations at Westminster Abbey. In the new Banqueting House designed by Inigo Jones and nearing completion in spring 1621, this ceremonial display of the Abraham tapestries accompanied the court’s observance of the Feast of the Knights of the Garter, held on Saint George’s Day, April 23.² Astington argues that “the ‘view’ James was taking of the Abraham tapestries in the days before April 23, 1621, bespeaks the concern of someone in control of the effects he wishes to create. The tapestries, after all, were quite

² James II was crowned in the presence of the Abraham tapestries, and Elizabeth I very likely was. Campbell surmises that the tapestries were acquired with the coronation of Edward VI in mind. Thomas Campbell, Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty: Tapestries at the Tudor Court (New Haven, CT: Paul Mellon Center and Yale University Press, 2007), 297.

My thanks to Tracey Schuster at the Getty Research Institute for assistance using the Getty Photo Collection, which houses one of the most comprehensive pictorial records of sixteenth-century tapestry in the world.
familiar to him. . . . Their subject, the legend of a founding patriarch of a chosen people, blessed by God, extended the echoes of historical destiny back to the beginning of time.”

This scene of the disposition of courtly space, from the labors of readying the room to the viewing of the tapestries themselves by the monarch as part of a ritual observance, draws together key features of what I call the sovereign softscape. In landscape design, “hardscape” refers to those semipermanent features of the grounds, such as paving, fountains, walls, arbors, earthworks, and waterways, that shape the infrastructure of the built environment. The “softscape,” on the other hand, encompasses the many plantings that limn the garden with their distinctive growth patterns, colors, fragrances, ambient sounds, and seasonal bloom and decay. In this article, I adapt the idea of the softscape to the appareling of courtly space, though the softscape also applies to dressed environments of all kinds, from the humble lodgings rented by Shakespeare on Silver Street to the thoroughfares of the city itself, which were wrapped in tapestry for royal entries and civic pageants.

Tapestries are “soft” in the most literal sense—supple, foldable, and yielding to the touch. Their pliancy contributed to their status as mobilia, or “movables”: the virtue of fabrics as tools of ceremonial scenography lay in their capacity to be hung up, taken down, shipped, and stored. Not unlike the softscapes of garden designers, moreover, tapestries participated in seasonal rhythms, marking festive events and lending their warmth to damp winter rooms and to drafty summer lodges. Like plant life, fabrics move with the breeze; subject to drape, drift, sag, billow, and bunch, the woven softscape manifests a peculiar animation, its responsive movement displaying something like an anima, or soul.

At stake in the sovereign softscape are two forms of assembly: the physical construction of courtly space out of fabrics and other transportable materials, on the one hand, and the gathering of persons in that space for the purposes of human interaction, mutual recognition, and celebration, on the other. Bruno Latour draws the material and the social dimensions of assembly together in his distinctive reading of “res publica,” the phrase that also governs the research program of this journal. Following Heidegger, Latour reminds us that “the old word ‘Thing’ or ‘Ding’ designated originally a certain type of assembly,” and he uses this etymology to “bring the res back to the res publica.” Such “things,” he writes, are not “matters of fact” but rather “matters of concern,” areas of public interest—including bioethics, ecology, health, and the technological conditions of democracy—that bring people together in response to distinct pragmata (things/circumstances/affairs).

In the first issue of this journal, Anthony Grafton visits a different res publica, the Renaissance Republic of Letters, which gathered scientists, humanists, poets, and artists in transnational spaces for creative and intellectual exchange, often in relation to col-

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3 Astington, “Jacobean Ghost,” 42.
lections of strange and wondrous objects. Grafton and Latour are both invested in recovering collaborative scenes of making and inquiry that convene things, people, and texts in physical and virtual locales (cities, libraries, laboratories, Kunstkammern, postal networks) whose forms of self-organization were not strictly statist. Both Grafton and Latour understand res publicae to encompass environments and objects as well as people, along with those forms of knowledge, both formal and tacit, that grasp these elements in their relation to each other.

In this article, I take Henry VIII’s Abraham tapestries as elements in a soft res publica—soft because they are made of fabric and because they adorned quasi-domestic spaces dedicated to the ceremonial life of the royal household. I am concerned here with tapestries as both conveyors of meaning and ensembles of affordances. I address, that is, both their iconographic contributions to the political theology of the Tudor and Stuart monarchies and their participation as monumental hangings in the larger assemblage of fabrics, furnishings, and persons that together helped construct the theatrum mundi of the court. The Abraham tapestries were designed to support the exercise and celebration of kingship in a period of religious, political, and social transformation. In the English context, these and other tapestries borrowed imagery, authority, and patterns of use from the dismantled Catholic Church, providing a liturgical lining for the domestic settings of state power. The world supported by tapestry, moreover, was biopolitical as well as political-theological: celebrating the bodily needs and reproductive power of the king as the center of sacral sovereignty and its rites of entertainment. Tapestry and other textiles participated in the media architecture of royalism not only through the images they displayed on their woven and painted planes but also through the forms of framing, veiling, display, and enclosure that their soft surfaces enabled. Although tapestries continued to play a role in court life after the Restoration, the Commonwealth’s sale of the royal collection and the scattering of the textile holdings accrued by the Tudor and Stuart monarchs signaled the end of the distinctive marriage between theater, politics, and theology that the sovereign softscape had shaped and sheltered so magnificently.

HANGING ABRAHAM, CIRCUMCISING ISAAC, CELEBRATING THE ROYAL HOUSEHOLD

Six tapestries from the original set of ten Abraham panels stand on display today in the Great Hall of Hampton Court Palace. When I first encountered the hangings in the summer of 2009, I found myself unexpectedly moved. I knew that Henry VIII had cultivated a series of identifications with Old Testament figures in the service of crafting a model of evangelical kingship suited to the new landscape of reform, but I did not know that he had elected Abraham as his represen-

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8 Grafton writes of the Republic of Letters: “it had no borders, no government, no capital” (ibid., 1).


The first tapestry in the series illustrates Genesis 12:1–8, whose opening words from God to Abraham, “Lech lecha” (“go forth,” or “go forth for yourself”), names a parsha (scriptural portion) in the Jewish cycle of Torah readings. According to exhibition notes in the hall, Henry used the example of Abraham to cast himself as the father of the English people. Just as Abraham had abandoned his native land, Henry had broken with the Catholic Church, a going forth (lech) that was also a “going forth for himself” (lecha), since such a departure also entailed a fundamental reconstitution and reorientation around a new identity for both patriarch and people.

But the sixth tapestry in the series, “Circumcision of Isaac,” drew me in even more (fig. 1). I had seen many Circumcisions of Christ, which typologically link the ritual cutting of Jesus to his Passion on the Cross, its repetition in the Mass, and its commemoration on January 1, the Feast of the Circumcision. When Isaac appears as a referent in these images, it is the akedah, or Sacrifice of Isaac, and not his circumcision, that is usually marshaled into symbolic service.¹²

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**Figure 1** Pieter Coecke van Aelst the Elder (likely designer), “Circumcision of Isaac.” Tapestry created in workshop of Willem de Kempeneer, Brussels, 1541–43. On display at Hampton Court Palace. © 2010, Royal Collection, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Reprinted with permission.

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¹² See, for example, the extraordinary Uffizi Triptych, by Andrea Mantegna (c. 1462–70), which features a circumcision in the right panel. Two grisailles that decorate the upper walls of the ecclesiastical space depict the Sacrifice of Isaac and Moses with the Tablets of the Law.
At the center of the tapestry, the whole household convenes around the naked infant Isaac; a heavily bearded Abraham performs the operation, while a servant, likely Eliezer, supports the child. Sarah and Hagar stand together, witnessing the act, while Ishmael observes the scene from just behind his father. The whole “blended family” is assembled, seams and all. The ceremony occurs indoors, in a grandly decorated apartment marked as a domestic, rather than ecclesiastical, space by the proximity of the adjoining bedroom and the absence of religious icons. In the upper left of the panel, we glimpse the birth of Isaac through a window (modeled on images of the birth of John and the birth of Mary). At the right, Sarah expels Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness (at the landscaped edge of the panel, further scenes of their sojourn play out); Abraham, his back to us, offers food and water to his departing handmaid and eldest son. The panel is executed in a monumental pictorial style that demonstrates the impact of Raphael’s *Acts of the Apostles*, the most famous and influential Renaissance tapestry based on Flemish tapestry design. (Henry purchased his own copy of *Acts* in 1542.)

Although also bearing signs of Michelangelo’s influence, the Abraham tapestries retain a Renaissance sense of decorum; whereas Mannerist and Baroque painters would take the akedah and the expulsion of Hagar as occasions for the magnification of pathos, the designers of the Abraham tapestries manage to balance movement with stasis and to moderate affect via the solemnity of circumstance.

When he procured these weavings in the 1540s, Henry had already amassed a huge number of hangings for use in his several palaces and in temporary follies like the Field of the Cloth of Gold. Henry appropriated many hangings from Cardinal Wolsey, along with Hampton Court Palace and the original core of Whitehall itself; he acquired elaborate new weavings like the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *History of Abraham* in direct competition with his more sophisticated Continental rivals. The extraordinary expansion of the Great Wardrobe as a result of the dissolution of the monasteries indicates the role played by large-scale tapestries in the medieval church, where they served as altar pieces, choir hangings, and altar frontals (*antependia*). Just as winged triptychs remained closed except during the Mass, major tapestries would dress the church only for festivals, their glamour reserved for sacramental display in the liturgical sanctuary of Catholic worship. The Abraham tapestries, however, despite their religious theme,

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14 The inventory held after the death of Henry VIII in January 1547 lists “2,700 tapestries divided among fourteen palaces, lesser residences, and four Removing Wardrobes” (Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 3). On the Field of the Cloth of Gold, see Campbell, *Henry VIII*, 143–55.

15 Henry’s collection was the largest of all the monarchs; the Spanish collection was the grandest and most sophisticated. Thomas Campbell, *Tapestry in the Baroque* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 107.


17 Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 26. The *antependium* covered the front of the altar; the ARTstor Digital Library contains many examples, some woven, some panel paintings, and some in gold relief, ivory, and other carved
clearly aimed to celebrate the state and not the church; or rather, they celebrated the Church of England as that which the king now headed thanks to his own dramatic lech lecha from Rome, while also detailing his capacities as the father of a large and fractured household. The tapestries shape an iconography of patriarchal kingship, a variation of the sacral kingship tested in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Abraham was a nomadic clansman who led his people out of the deserts of paganism and into the promised land of a new national and religious self-consciousness, but who did so without the benefit of Mosaic law or Davidic dominion. Instead, he oversaw domestic offices of matchmaking, matrimony, childbearing, hospitality, and the planning of funerals while making treaties and contracts with neighboring leaders and with God.

Although we do not know if the Brussels merchant Willem de Kempeneer commissioned the tapestries according to a program specified by Henry or simply organized their creation with Henry in mind, Henry did acquire the editio princeps of the weavings, whose program melded well with his political, theological, and domestic concerns in the 1540s. Henry aimed to identify more or less directly with the heroes of the Old Testament as men who received their authority directly from God. Abraham, unlike David and Solomon, was a patriarch and not a king: the leader of a seminomadic household in a prepolitical domain marked by transitory alliances and the hazards of hospitality. Henry’s court was also a household; indeed, its main administrative offices grew out of the maintenance of the monarch’s personal needs. In the 1540s, Henry was concerned about the legal status of Princess Mary following the birth of Edward in 1537, a predicament that resonates with the Hagar scene at the right of “Circumcision of Isaac,” which balances Abraham’s pity with Sarah’s determination to exile the older child and his mother in favor of her newborn son. The last tapestry in the series depicts the story of Eliezer’s courtship of Rebecca on behalf of Isaac, a narrative that shifts attention from the father to the son; Campbell suggests that the set as a whole may have been purchased with the coronation of Edward VI in mind. In any case, “the theme of God’s covenant with Abraham, continued through his son Isaac, offered a powerful prototype for the continuation of the ‘sacral’ Tudor line.”

There appears to be very little visual precedent for depicting the circumcision of Isaac. Ample models existed, however, in scenes of Christ’s circumcision, and Pieter Coecke van Aelst the Elder (1502–50), who likely helped design the Abraham series, had painted several of them, based on a type that was common in Flemish altarpieces of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centu-

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18 I rely here on Thomas Campbell’s account of the design and acquisition of the tapestries: “The Story of Abraham Tapestries at Hampton Court Palace,” in Flemish Tapestry in European and American Collections: Studies in Honor of Guy Delmarcel, ed. Koenrad Brosens (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2003), 59–86. Campbell recapitulates similar arguments in Henry VIII.

19 Campbell, Henry VIII, 293.

20 Ibid., 297.


22 ARTstor records one instance, from a thirteenth-century Bible moralisée. The Index of Christian Art records twenty instances; several are explicitly typological (e.g., Circumcision of Isaac depicted next to Circumcision of Christ, in Typological Life of Christ, Morgan Library M.649), while others occur in sequences illustrating Genesis. Byzantine examples predominate. Some link the circumcision of Isaac to his weaning; others depict the circumcision of Ishmael. Other examples in tapestry postdate this set and are derived from it. Most were woven from the same cartoons; I located one that appears to be a freer interpretation: http://archives.getty.edu:30008/getty_images/digitalresources/tapestries/0237711.jpg.
In most of these altarpieces, the Magi visit the Christ child in the central panel, often carrying splendid gifts in the Netherlandish tradition. A circumcision takes place in the right-hand panel; a circular canopy usually hangs above a round table draped in ceremonial cloth, lending a sense of ecclesia to the rite. (The left panel usually houses the Adoration of the Shepherds.)

The “Circumcision of Isaac” is also divided into three planes, with the circumcision moved to the center and the birth of Isaac and expulsion of Ishmael on the left and right, respectively. The circular canopy that hovers over the infant Jesus in the triptychs takes on even lighter form in the chandelier that illumines the central event in the tapestry. The altar-like table on which Jesus is often circumcised becomes a low, pillowed chest, also used as a bench, physically and symbolically lowering the sacred plane. The gift-bearing figure at the left and the supplicating figure holding a birth laver at the right recall the attending Magi in the Netherlandish circumcision altarpieces. The designers have in effect combined images of Christ’s circumcision with those of the Epiphany in order to come up with a compact and resonant inventione for an unusual subject. It is an image fit for a king—indeed, for this king: a monarch celebrating the birth of his son and concerned about the legitimacy of his daughters as he exercises what the allegorical Virtue in the upper-right border calls “Liber Pater,” the freedom of the patriarch to have multiple wives and to decide their fates (fig. 2).

Although Henry’s “Circumcision of Isaac” is in no direct way “Protestant” (the Brussels workshops were under the protection of Charles V and did not participate in anti-Catholic or pro-Tudor propaganda), its design for display in the Great Hall of a king rather than as the backdrop for a Mass effectively displaces the Eucharistic references of its Christ prototypes. The birth laver proffered just beneath the child and in front of the chest, however, reminds us of baptism and thus continues the work of connecting the theme of the circumcision of Isaac to Christian orders of meaning. Edward’s christening had occurred in Hampton Court Palace a few years earlier (accompanied by plentiful tapestries), and the woven scene resonates with the royal celebration and the hopes for succession it represented. The footed laver highlights the domestic character of the scene by its reference to the blessings of birth, covenant, succession, and household wealth rather than, say, to the redemptive economy of sacrifice. The laver also instantiates through its baptismal references the living relationship between religious and secular worlds of meaning and action in the period. In 1548 Giorgio Vasari chose to decorate his mar-

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23 E.g., Adoration with Nativity and Circumcision, workshop of Hans Memling, late fifteenth century, Musée de Cluny, Paris. The Getty Center Photo Collection records several examples of tapestries depicting the Circumcision of Christ, usually designed for liturgical settings; e.g., http://archives.getty.edu:30008/getty_images/digitalresources/tapestries/0239256.jpg.

A German cushion cover, 1576–1660, might have been designed for domestic use: http://archives.getty.edu:30008/getty_images/digitalresources/tapestries/0184768.jpg.

24 Other circumcision scenes take place in an ecclesiastic space clearly identified as the Temple of Solomon: e.g., Guilio Romano, Circumcision of Christ, before 1524, Louvre, Paris. Romano’s painting shares its twisted Solomonic columns with Raphael’s Acts of the Apostles cartoons and tapestries. Romano likely assisted Raphael on the cartoons. The Index of Christian Art records Abraham seated in a chair, circumcising Isaac, who is held by another figure: Cotton Genesis, fifth to sixth century, Cott.Otho.B.VI, British Library, London.


26 Medieval illuminations sometimes depict the Baptism of Christ next to Hiram’s Laver, a fountain-like piece of outdoor furnishing from the Temple of Solomon (1 Kings 7:40) that served as a model for the baptismal font. E.g., Speculum Humanae Salvationis, M. 385, fol. 14v, Morgan Library, New York.

riage chamber at the Casa Vasari with images of Abraham. In 1602 a visitor to Hampton Court Palace saw tapestries of Lot and Abraham in the queen’s apartments, likely in her withdrawing room. Bess of Hardwick also liked to display a four-panel Abraham set in her “withdrawing chamber.” Embroidered boxes made by aristocratic Englishwomen in the seventeenth century for personal use frequently featured scenes from the life of Abraham. In the eighteenth century, the Abraham tapestries were moved to the royal apartments built by Christopher Wren. All these settings indicate the suitability of Abrahamic themes to household matters.

Although typology does not disappear completely from the scenes set by the Abraham tapestries, the domestic and political concerns of the weavings, as well as Henry’s typically Protestant interest in establishing a direct relation to the Old Testament patriarchs, send the Christianizing dynamics of supersessionism into retreat. Although the powerful seventh tapestry of the series depicts the akedah, the designs do not elicit strong parallels between the circumcision and the interrupted sacrifice. Instead, the emphasis in the circumcision panel falls on the blessings of Abraham in the form of his progeny, as well as the costs of those blessings to Hagar and Ishmael. The effect of the tapestry as a whole is to de-typologize and de-sacramentalize the theme of circumcision, by returning the more familiar Circumcision of Christ to its primal scene in Jewish history and practice. The birth laver reminds us, however, that these Hebraic hangings remain properties of Christen-

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31 Mary M. Brooks, *English Embroideries of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries in the Collection of the Ashmolean Museum* (London: Jonathan Horne, 2004). Of seventeen catalog entries, four feature scenes from the life of Abraham; all were made by women for personal use.


33 Compare the Chamber of Abraham in the Casa Vasari, designed and painted by its inhabitant, Giorgio Vasari, in 1548, which also emphasized household matters. See Cheney, “Vasari’s Chamber of Abraham.”
Any reverse typology achieved by the tapestry’s designers does not manifest a desire to encounter circumcision “in itself,” as a rite going forth from and for the Jewish people (lech lecha) in their cultural or cultic authenticity. Although the narrative challenge of transposing circumcision from Jesus back to Isaac, and from Catholic church to Reformation palace, has the unintended effect of loosening Christological and Eucharistic interpretations of circumcision, the result is not simply secularizing. Instead, the tapestries contribute to Tudor political theology. In the Abraham tapestries, the topos of patriarchal kingship serves to bind Old Testament narratives to the mythography of the secular state in an attempt to bypass and neutralize pre-Reformation liturgical impulses. Such a translatio reorganizes and revalues the religious resources it appropriates by rendering them less Catholic and at least nominally more Jewish, the latter occurring as a side effect rather than being an intention of the larger iconographic venture.

Simply by virtue of being tapestry, the History of Abraham retains a relationship to the phenomenology of religion. What is at stake here is not only tapestry’s relationship to medieval Christendom but also the way that the affordances of tapestry model variations on immanence and transcendence. Tapestry reveals and conceals (and thus partakes in epiphany and apocalypse); tapestry shelters and protects (and thus figures the hovering character of the heavenly cielo and the Hebrew shekhinah); tapestry moves with the breeze (and hence manifests a kind of animation or ensouledness); tapestry can be hung up and then taken down (and thus follows a rhythm of deposition and resurrection or of advent and withdrawal); tapestry places softscape on hardscape (and thus pictures the relationship of flesh to bone). These are not simply metaphors. They describe the special virtues, capacities, and affordances of tapestry. To dress a hall with ambitious weavings is to mark off the time as well as the space that will be enjoyed in their august yet warm presence and thus to participate in a dynamic of sacralization that is also an act of welcoming, of enfolding enclosure. If there were a philosophy of fabric, it would include political theology in its voluminous folds. This is not to say that all premodern tapestry was religious in origin or function; like the cassone, or wedding chests, of Renaissance Florence, tapestry functioned as an early incubator for secular representations, especially scenes from romance, chivalry, and everyday life. Rather, the settings of the great hall, the hunting lodge, and the marriage chamber shared ceremonial, seasonal, and life cycle rhythms with the church calendar and its media sensorium. The membrane separating the sacred from the profane was more like silk than stone: permeable, translucent, and capable of being drawn, raised, knotted, stretched, or ripped.

You can take the tapestry out of the church, but you cannot take the church out of the tapestry—not did Henry want to. Grand series like the History of Abraham were designed to dress up, set off, and display a zone (to scoop a soft space out of a hard one) in which majesty could be conjured to appear. As Thomas Campbell argues, the series as a whole confirmed Henry’s self-understanding of his royal office: “Abraham, founder of the Hebrew nation and first of the great patriarchs, was the Old Testament model most congenial for Henry as he sought to establish a new Church of England centered on the Tudor dynasty.” And tapestry, not fresco or panel painting, was the medium in which “Henry commissioned the figurative works of art that were designed to substantiate” this new role. Choosing Abraham as his representative meant electing a powerful father, husband, and host whose direct covenanting with God rendered him subordinate to no priest.

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35 Campbell, Henry VIII, 288.
36 Campbell, Tapestry in the Renaissance, 3.
or rabbi. Circumcision is the minimal signature of patriarchal kingship: a mark on the generative organ of the male body that institutes bonds within the family (above all, from Abraham to Isaac) and the household (the commandment includes slaves) in relation to a God who has elected to covenant more particularly with his creation by founding the generations that will become Israel. These patriarchal themes accommodate the tapestries to the Great Hall as a site of entertainment as well as to the more private chambers where they would eventually migrate, while remaining grand enough in both their vertical and their horizontal reach (from Abraham to God and from Abraham to his glorious seed) to shelter, softly, the coronation of princes.

**SOFT RES PUBLICA**

“<i>To assemble</i>” means to put together or construct; for example, the Office of Tents and Revels, in cooperation with the Great Wardrobe, <i>assembled</i> a palace at the Field of the Cloth of Gold out of timber and canvas and then adorned it with tapestries. Words for such assembly that show up in the administrative records of the period include “<i>edifying</i>,” “<i>m/r</i>” (making ready), “<i>appareling</i>,” and “<i>hanging</i>; preparing great rooms for entertainments included building stages, seating, and the king’s “<i>state</i>” out of timber and then wrapping them in tapestries. When not in use, upholstered furniture, along with carpets (for tables) and tapets (for floors), remained in storage, under the care of the Great Wardrobe or one of the Removing Wardrobes—essentially boards on sawhorses—afforded easy setup and breakdown, though they were also subject to occasional, disastrous tipping.

Assembly and disassembly characterized the sovereign softscape as a flexible floor plan housing temporary structures clothed in a variety of fabrics. Yet “<i>assembly</i>” also refers to the gathering of people for the purposes of discussion, deliberation, or protest, as in the “<i>freedom of assembly</i>” protected in the First Amendment. As Hannah Arendt argues in <i>The Human Condition</i>, the fact of human gathering itself, and not any architectural or institutional infrastructure, forms the main condition of the political as that form of the vita activa through which humans appear as human to each other: “The <i>polis</i>, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location: it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. . . . It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their experience explicitly.” For Arendt,

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37 Gen. 17:10–12.
38 Astington suggests that “one version of the court theater . . . may well have been a timber framework hung with expensive drapery, its magnificence matching the decoration of the temporary auditorium around it”; John H. Astington, <i>English Court Theatre, 1558–1642</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 29. For examples of “<i>hanging</i>” and “<i>appareling</i>,” see Chamber Account transcripts, Malone Society, <i>Collections VI</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 97, 110, 152, 153. For “<i>edifying</i>,” see W. R. Streitberger, <i>Court Revels, 1485–1559</i> (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 178.
39 Astington, <i>English Court Theatre</i>, 14.
40 At the investiture of Charles Stuart as Duke of York in 1604, guests “furiously assaulted” the tables piled high with food, with the result that “down went table and tresses before one bit was touched”; Jerry Brotton, <i>The Sale of the Late King’s Goods: Charles I and His Art Collection</i> (London: Macmillan, 2006), 28. More solidly constructed tables, sometimes called “<i>joined tables</i>” or “<i>dormant tables</i>,” were becoming common in the Jacobean period and provided more stability but were otherwise less convenient. Frederick Litchfield, <i>Illustrated History of Furniture</i> (London: Truslove and Hanson, 1907), 103–4.
41 Hannah Arendt, <i>The Human Condition</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198. I develop the significance of Arendt’s phenomenology of publicity in my <i>Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life</i>
encountering others in the act of speaking freely disentangles a person, at least for the moment, from the domestic concerns of the *oikos*, whose arduous management of the needs of life binds one to other living creatures and to the world of things. To assemble in this sense is not to build a stage or set up tables but rather to bring people together in a moment of conflict, deliberation, or mutual recognition whose effects are unpredictable and capable of bringing new sequences of events and relationships into the world. In the existential scene of politics set by the civic humanist tradition, the claims of the material world, including the tick-tock of our own corporeality, momentarily recede or withdraw, displaced by the subjective self-disclosure of acting in public, indeed, of *creating a public, allowing a public to emerge as such*, through the exercise of substantial speech.

Assembly, then, is divided between the material supports and procedures that construct the built environment, on the one hand, and human acts of convocation for the purpose of decision making, debate, judgment, protest, or witnessing, on the other. Though acts of human assembly are often framed by specific kinds of architecture (public plaza, city hall, Internet platform, departmental conference room, neighborhood playground), the scene of politics in Arendt’s sense calls only for the presence of others. The politics of the courtly scene, however, requires the most elaborate assembly of the material sort in order to facilitate assembly of the human sort. Because courtly space is designed to amplify the sovereignty of the monarch, its physical aspects do not retreat when humans assemble in its halls but, to the contrary, are brought into further play by the presence of the king and his guests. The court itself is not a place so much as an entourage, a traveling show composed of persons and the manifold *mobilia* needed to define and support their status. Unlike the self-organizing forms of political appearing that Arendt discerns in the drama of human interaction, the politics peculiar to spaces like the Great Hall at Hampton Court or the Banqueting House at Whitehall solicits the physical conditions of the room to make their own appearance as ongoing contributors (Latour might say “actants”) to the court’s society of spectacle.

If, for Arendt, drama is the genre of human action that belongs most emphatically to the *polis*, 

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43 Arendt, Human Condition, 187.
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entertainment would be the form of spectacle proper to courtly space. Entertainments, she writes, “serve the life processes of society, even though they may not be as necessary as bread and meat. They serve, that is, to while away the time, and the vacant time which is whiled away is not leisure time, strictly speaking—time, that is, in which we are free from all cares and activities necessitated by the life process and therefore free for the world and its culture—it is rather left-over time, which is still biological in nature, left over after labor and sleep have received their due.”

Although Arendt is addressing entertainment in the age of mass media, her diagnosis pertains to courtly entertainment as well, which took its guests’ bodily dependence on food, drink, shelter, and clothing as the opportunity for cultivated display in a choreography of recognition and acknowledgment organized around the badges of status. In the theater of hospitality, the arts of eating, drinking, and making merry are corporeal performances that cast a theatrical shadow without separating fully from digestive processes and thus dwell in a “left-over time” that remains “biological in nature.” The dissociation of the human from its creaturely and inanimate surroundings that marks the properly political for Arendt does not obtain in the setting of
courtly entertainment, where guests are called to assemble around the physical presence of the monarch in his capacity as host and are thus exposed to their continuing affinity with “other living or inanimate things.”

The administrative offices of the Tudor state emerged out of the intimate life and bodily needs of the monarch, ensuring that a certain softness, a fleshly vulnerability, remained at the beating heart of kingship. Tudor “chamber administration” — the executive branch of the government, consisting of a council advising the king — grew out of the duties associated with the chamber or personal rooms of the monarch. The Office of the Wardrobe, “responsible for the soft furnishings of the royal palaces,” also offered a means for English kings to control their own revenues and “offset the growing power of parliament.”

By expanding the scope, staff, and budgets of putatively domestic departments, the household of the king, originally dedicated to the care of his physical being, became a crucial arena for centralizing and bureaucratizing the modern state. Such a dynamic was both political-theological (attached to the sacred character of the king’s body) and biopolitical (maintaining the management of life at the mythic and practical center of the expanding state). Whereas the vita activa of the classical polis defines itself by its freedom from the cares of the oikos, courtly space, as the architectural support and reflection of the royal household and its bodily ministrations, retains domestic concerns at the center of its ceremonials.

When James I viewed the History of Abraham during the Feast of the Knights of the Garter in 1621, he would have been seated in a “state,” the canopied dais occupied by the monarch at every public audience, a fabrication that visualized the biopolitical and political-theological core of chamber administration. The king’s state was composed of a raised platform, called a “halpace” or haut-pas (high step); its floorboards were covered in a luxurious tapet; and the whole affair was backed by a heraldic tapestry (“cloth of state”) that extended outward into a sheltering canopy.

The state housed one or more upholstered chairs, which otherwise remained in storage, chairs still being relatively rare and a mark of high status into the Jacobean period. The king’s state was “hung” by “yeoman hangers,” terms that indicate the wrapped, continuous character of the sovereign softscape, which was composed of a series of wooden frameworks (state, stage, seating, trestles) appareled in gorgeous fabrics. The state derived from the baldachin, an ecclesiastical canopy raised over altars, tombs, and the ceremonial chairs of bishops, an origin that bound the sumptuary shell of the king to the history of the church and its furnishings while drawing on tapestry’s architectural affordances, its affiliation with tents and awnings. Visualizing the sanctity of the king, this open pavilion also identified the king’s majesty with his physical vulnerability, his need to be safeguarded from too much sun, rain, noxious air, or unseemly mingling.

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46 The “cloth of state” referred to the fabric elements (back piece and awning); the “state” is the complete assemblage. See John Britton et al., *A Dictionary of the Architecture and Archaeology of the Middle Ages* (London: Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1838), 275.

47 “The concept of the ceremonial chair seems to be as old as the chair itself”; Claire Graham, *Ceremonial and Commemorative Chairs of Great Britain* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1994), 1–2.


Carl Schmitt, modern renovator of political theology, writes of the role of representation in politics:

Representation is something existential. To represent is to make an invisible being visible and present through a publicly present one. . . . That is not possible with just any type of being. Indeed, it presupposes a special type of being. Something dead, something inferior or valueless, something lowly cannot be represented. It lacks the enhanced type of being that is capable of an existence, of rising into the public being. Words like size, height, majesty, fame, dignity, and honor seek to express the peculiarity of enhanced being that is capable of representation.50

The king is “publicly present”; the king is he who can make visible the invisible unity of the realm by virtue of occupying a place in the chain of royal succession, a biopolitical fact that grants him his “enhanced being,” his difference from other beings. The “invisible being” rendered visible by representation is not simply a fiction; it is “something existential,” insofar as the king’s place in the succession cannot be filled by simply anyone, while the unity of the people represented by the king preexists his eminent embodiment of their collectivity. This unity may be invisible, but it is concrete and real, not abstract or fictional.51 The “invisible being” made visible by the monarch concerns both his personal sovereignty and the corporate coherence of the body politic itself, a suture that would fall into crisis in the English Civil War, as demonstrated by Ernst Kantorowicz.52 If the “invisible being” fails to appear on its own (if the monarch is, say, short, fat, pimpled, syphilitic, hunchbacked, female, a minor, or otherwise unprepossessing, as monarchs often were), the technology of the fabric state, in concert with the other accoutrements of courtly space, stands ready to solicit and sustain its appearance. Representation is doubly at stake in the generation of such sovereign attributes as “size, height, majesty, fame, dignity, and honor”: the king in his chair of state comes forward as the proper representative of the body politic, but he does so thanks to visual technologies that represent him to the court and to himself in his royal capacity. In his state, and increasingly as the state, the king is present to all assembled, at once a picture in a frame and a statue in an alcove. The king’s state, like a camera, is both a little room within a larger chamber and a projection box that crops, focuses, and renders iconic the one who poses in its wood and textile aperture.

This scene of political representation, moreover, is theatrical as well as aesthetic. Schmitt writes: “Not only do the representative and the person represented require a value, so also does the third party whom they address. One cannot represent oneself to automatons and machines,


51 Timonthy Wong glosses the passage from Schmitt: “It is not the case that the ‘invisible being’ does not exist. In fact, the presence of this invisible being is the very condition of the possibility of representation. . . . The people are already unified, but not organized as an explicit state. It is representation that does this. Representation is a necessary function of state form, which transforms the popular will and the people via presentation of the people and its popular will” (“Steward of the Dying Voice,” 122).

52 Ernst Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957). Kahn argues that Kantorowicz aims to show “how the idea of the two bodies could morph into the distinction between person and office, which in turn played a crucial role in the de-throning of Charles I in 1649. If charisma is one effect of the king’s two bodies, the other is—at least in the long run—constitutionalism”; Victoria Kahn, “Political Theology and Fiction in The King’s Two Bodies,” Representations 106 (Spring 2009): 78. On the “invisible being” as “a people existing as a political unity,” see Schmitt, Constitutional Theory, 243.
any more than they can represent or be represented.” The king, that is, requires an audience. Those who assemble around him represent a collective to and for each other via the king’s iconic representation of the realm as a single entity. The courtly environment, defined by the disposition of multiple soft follies, is also “the space where I appear to others as others appear to me” (Arendt); at court, those forms of mutual recognition, though reciprocal, are not equal. Moreover, though the persons hosted in this royal environs experience their difference from “other living or inanimate things” by virtue of appearing to each other (Arendt again), that separation remains fundamentally incomplete, drawing on the accoutrements of courtly décor and bidding them to appear as well, to come forward as participants in the generation of splendor.

Entertainment, as the medium proper to courtly space, unfolds as the relationship between the assembly of things, on the one hand, and the assembly of persons, on the other; the peculiar assemblage of the person of the king, moreover, depends on both material enhancements and the collective social acknowledgment of their sovereign effects. Royal entertainment is biopolitical insofar as it takes bodily needs (food, drink, clothing, shelter) as the immediate occasion for the convening of persons. It is political-theological insofar as it draws on the techniques of culture and cultivation to transform those functions into higher forms of life identified with the majesty of the king, producing a phenomenal zone, a space of appearance, that is neither simply physical nor purely representational. One name given to that zone is “magnificence,” a princely effect produced by the appropriate acquisition and display of precious materials, expert craftsmanship, and a sense of style realized in both execution and deportment. Magnificence magnifies the “enhanced being” of the king. Magnificence, moreover, is delivered via goods that cling to sumptuary functions and thus bear a special relationship to the decorative arts and design.

The Abrahan tapestries contributed to a soft res publica, in which a wealth of objects disposed in an adjustable space dispersed, attenuated, and domesticated but also reflected and amplified courtly forms of political speech within the ritualized scripts of meeting, greeting, and eating. In “Circumcision of Isaac,” the exaggerated supplication of the Magus-like steward extending the birth laver lends the marble flooring a dais-like character, emphasized by the steps (haut-pas) leading to it. In this ceremony of corporeal ostentation and exposure, human gesture and posture reflect and reinforce architectural cues, projecting a body politic that continues to take a special body (the person of the king, in this case represented by the infant Isaac more than by the ministering Abraham) as its orienting reference point. The History of Abraham most certainly required assembly: it took eight men four days to hang the huge, heavy panels in the Banqueting House in 1621.

Other apparatuses also needed to be installed to “m/r” the room for viewing. The chandelier that hangs above the bench in the tapestry would have been echoed in the lighting systems of the Banqueting House (fig. 3).

53 Carl Schmitt, Roman Catholicism and Political Form, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996); cited by Frank, “Re-imagining the Public Sphere,” 76.

54 Thomas Campbell defines magnificence as “the public demonstration of power and wealth through lavish and tasteful expenditure and generosity” (Henry VIII, 7). He connects magnificence to the decorative arts, including their eclipse in mainstream art history (ibid., xiii).


56 Brass chandeliers like this one were usually made in the Netherlands; by the seventeenth century, they might have included arms or chains of reflective rock crystal; Charles I owned at least two. Peter Thornton, Seventeenth Century Interior Decoration in England, France, and Holland (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), 274–75. Martin Mortimer notes that major lighting fixtures were moved from location to location for state events. See his The English Glass Chandelier (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collector’s Club, 2000), 47, 51. Mortimer also notes that glass...
Illuminating the hall was the responsibility of the wiredrawer, who not only designed and installed simple fixtures but also managed the system of wires and pulleys that allowed chandeliers to be lit. The lighting and the tapestries were part of a single environmental ensemble. The gold and silver threads that gave weavings like the History of Abraham their extraordinarily high cost were not simply status symbols but also reflective elements that increased the impact of candlelight. As Peter Thornton notes, Heinrich Heimbach’s midcentury painting of a banquet captures some of the shimmering play between light and fabric in the period (fig. 4).

chandeliers were assembled by upholsterers, who used similar trimmings in “the embellishment of the splendid Court furniture of the later seventeenth century” (52).

57 Astington, English Court Theatre, 97, 105–6. A major portion of the Revels accounts for the Stuart period consists of lighting costs, which included the “braunches” (candelabra) themselves, as well as wires, candles, candlesticks, candle plates, and “tassels & frendge to garnishe the braunches.” Jacobean and Caroline Revels Accounts, 1603–1642, Malone Society Collections, vol. 13 (Oxford: University Printing House, 1986), 83–84.

Candlelight around the table catches the faces of the guests while the tapestry panels bounce back the light, as if they themselves were sources of illumination. One of the narrow panels in the Heimbach painting curls in at the side, revealing its textile properties, while a larger panel at the right is made to turn a corner, softening the hardscape of the room. For events at the Banqueting House or the Great Hall, the chandeliers, wall sconces (with their own reflective plates), and large candlestands would have flooded the room with additional light. Astington describes the sovereign softscape as a sequence of “dynamic and striking compositions executed in terms of texture and soft, glowing color, accented with shimmering reflective thread, lively and mobile in candlelight.”

Environmental psychologists speak of ambient light as depending on an environment of surfaces; tapestries contribute to the atmosphere of the room by reflecting light as well as absorbing sound. Moreover, although the king viewed the Abraham tapestries before the Feast of the Knights of the Garter in a formal act of acknowledgment and appreciation, most of the viewing that weekend would have occurred in a more ambient and ambulatory manner. Modern branding experts might speak here of the design, not of objects, but of environments and experiences, which required extensive “m/r” on the part of weavers, decorators, and stewards as well as the active enjoyment of the readied space by the guests, who contributed their laughter, conversation, and glittering clothing, along with their nervous coughs and digestive noises, to the general ambience.

Abraham’s chandelier has ushered us into the zone of magnificence, brought into being by material goods of the highest value and workmanship, yet not reducible to matter alone, thanks not only to the schöne Schein of aesthetic play but also to the human communicative exchanges and acts of self-disclosure that took place within its padded Umwelt. Hung by an army of workmen on the walls, around the sovereign, on the banks of seating, and at the back of the stage on which professional actors performed masques and dramas, a rich ensemble of fabrics in concert with a host of candles and other accessories helped shape the atmosphere of enjoyment and exchange that unfolded within their lustrous empire. Tapestry, candles and their fixtures, wooden structures wrapped in fabric, guests in their attire, actors on the stage, and yeoman hangers and wiredrawers were all actants, or better, celebrants, in the scene of courtly space, with the framed being of the monarch as both celebrandum and co-celebrant. The soft res publica installed by such furnishings partook in neither the popular publics imagined by Latour nor the scholarly conversations revisited by Grafton; they certainly rarely rose to the kind of genuine political encounter sought with such fierce moral intelligence by Arendt, who had little patience for either luxury goods or elitist chatter. Yet history was made in rooms upholstered by such installations; in 1630 Charles I signed a treaty with Spain in the company of the History of Abraham; throughout his reign, the Abraham tapestries were “regularly taken to London to be hung in the Ban-

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60 The father of environmental psychology is James J. Gibson. Distinguishing between the radiant light studied by physical scientists and the ambient light studied by environmental psychologists, Gibson writes, “Radiant light comes from atoms and returns to atoms; ambient light depends upon an environment of surfaces. Radiant light is energy; ambient light can be information”; The Ecological Theory of Perception (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1986), 51.

61 On ambient vision and ambulatory animals, see ibid.

62 “Branded goods are experiential commodities. . . . However, contrary to, say, a feature film, and like, say, a computer-game, brands do not so much provide ready made experiences, as much as they enable the production, or co-creation, of an experience, or, for that matter, more enduring forms of immaterial use-values, like identity and community”; Adam Arvidsson, Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture (London: Routledge, 2006), 180.
queting House at Whitehall Palace for important state receptions.\textsuperscript{63} The coronations of several monarchs in Westminster occurred in the presence of these and other major tapestry series.\textsuperscript{64} It may have been a soft res publica to which tapestry contributed, but it was a res publica—a public gathering of persons and things—nonetheless.

**CURTAIN CALL: DISASSEMBLY REQUIRED**

In 1642 Charles I was forced to leave London and his royal residences. A pamphlet published shortly thereafter describes the denuded state of Whitehall in the absence of the king, including the abandoned spaces of courtly entertainment:

> In the Cockpit and Revelling Roomes, where at a Play or Masque the darkest night was converted to the brightest Day that ever shin’d, by the luster of Torches, the sparkling of rich Jewells, and the variety of those incomparable and excellent Faces, from whence the other derived their brightness, where beauty sat enthron’d in its fully glory, that had not Phaeton fir’d the World, there had wanted a Comparative whereunto to parallel the refulgencie of their bright-shining splendor. Now you may goe in without a Ticket or the danger of a broken pate, you may enter at Kings side, walke around the Theaters, view the Pullies, the Engines, conveyances, or contrivances of every severall Scæne.\textsuperscript{65}

In this passage, the author uses the nudity of abandoned stage machinery to expose the aesthetic technologies of royal power, represented above all by the “refulgencie of . . . bright-shining splendor”: the reflective play of candlelight and jewelry setting off the faces of the Beautiful People, who contributed their own sumptuary elegance to the courtly atmosphere. Although the short pamphlet begins in what appears to be a genuine Ubi sunt complaint on behalf of the court, it moves into court satire by the end, as if to take us through and beyond the mystifications of royalty by guiding us through the rooms of the deserted palace. This extraordinary little document uses the format of an architectural guidebook to conduct a political commentary in shifting satiric keys, in order to find its way in the surreal terrain of a new res publica.

In February 1649, just days after the execution of Charles I outside Inigo Jones’s Banqueting House, the Rump Parliament began the work of selling off the king’s household goods. The sale, writes Jerry Brotton, “represented a conscious act of political iconoclasm as much as a brutal piece of financial asset stripping.”\textsuperscript{66} Those involved in making an inventory and setting the prices of the royal collection included Ralph Grafton, a successful draper and upholsterer who must have viewed the furnishings with a professional eye.\textsuperscript{67} The inventory included over sixteen hundred tapestries, most appraised at ridiculously low prices. The ambitious tapestry sets, however, came in at prices well above Charles’s oil paintings, and of these, the History of Abraham received the highest valuation, at £8,260. A thousand tapestries were dispersed between 1649 and

\textsuperscript{63} Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 416.

\textsuperscript{64} Campbell, “Story of Abraham Tapestries,” 59.

\textsuperscript{65} A deep sigh breath’d through the lodgings at White-hall, deploring the absence of the court, and the miseries of the palace (London: Printed for N. V. and J. B., 1642). Brotton cites the pamphlet but does not comment on its satiric turn (Sale of the Late King’s Goods, 221). On the rebranding campaigns of the English Commonwealth, see Sean Kelsey, *Inventing a Republic: The Political Culture of the English Commonwealth, 1649–53* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

\textsuperscript{66} Brotton, *Sale of the Late King’s Goods*, 217.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 220.
1652, some to the homes of members of Parliament and many to foreign collectors. The *History of Abraham* set was among those unsold when Oliver Cromwell was elected Lord Protector, and he reserved the hangings for his own use in Hampton Court Palace, which became Cromwell’s weekend residence (like a modern commuter or a Renaissance king, he worked Monday through Friday at Whitehall). Needless to say, he retained no cloths of state or royal canopies.

Although much of the royal collection eventually returned to the restored royal household, the uses of magnificence would now belong to a reorganized res publica of things. In the eighteenth century, tapestries began to hang permanently in royal apartments rather than rest in reserve for festive occasions, a change in deportment that divested them of their historic links to the liturgical rhythms of display and withdrawal and hastened their real and experiential fading in the sunlight of daily use. In 1760, with the accession of George III, Hampton Court Palace became a kind of residential hotel for impoverished nobility distinguished by their service to the Crown. In 1838 Queen Victoria commanded that the place “should be thrown open to all her subjects without restriction, and without fee or gratuity of any kind.” Three years later, six of the Abraham tapestries were transferred from the state apartments designed by Christopher Wren back to the Tudor Great Hall at Hampton Court, making them available for public enjoyment.

The *History of Abraham* had become part of a very different res publica: neither the courtly space of the Tudor and Stuart monarchs nor the eerie emptying and reassembly of that space under Cromwell’s ambivalent protectorate but rather a national culture of parks, museums, and monuments. The decline of tapestry’s appeal as a visual form is surely due in part to the limiting of its affordances, of its manifold mobilities and sovereign softnesses. To treat tapestry like a painting—flat, untouchable, and always on display—is to blunt its phenomenological capacities. Those affordances, moreover, are precisely what place tapestry in the proximity of theology; when religious structures themselves have flattened, thinned, or become transparent within new orders of things, those affordances loosen their claims on us and shake off their mystery. And yet the modern museum is not bereft of wonder; even monuments to the postal service or the railroad are fed by some tendril of political theology (*that* stamp; *that* train). Both museological and courtly spaces are settings in which things are solicited to appear, to manifest some piece of their “invisible being” that exceeds our own subjective possession of them. The exhibition halls of the museum and the court are theaters of phenomenology whose hosting and framing mechanisms invite objects to reveal themselves as actants, *mobilia* requesting our acknowledgment in a res publica composed of persons and things.

It was in the Great-Hall-turned-museum at Hampton Court Palace that I found myself so unexpectedly privy to Isaac’s circumcision. The political theology that inheres in such a moment of call and response does not belong simply to the past, as a feature of Tudor propaganda, but

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69 Ibid., 361; Roy Sherwood, *Oliver Cromwell, King in All but Name, 1653–1658* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 33.
73 Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 416.
rather bears on tapestry’s existential modes of appearing—including its deep affiliation with bodily care (sleep, shelter, privacy, warmth, table fellowship) and with affordances such as wrapping, hanging, billowing, awning, and revealing—that partake in a set of animations shared with both liturgical practice and religious metaphor. To set up and break down a room, a stage, or a campsite is to assemble and disassemble a world, to participate in the making public of its media without necessarily demystifying its conditions of appearance. If the fabricated character of courtly space conceals its own fold, allowing disassembly to become permanent in periods of crisis, that same fold also ensures a measure of continuity between the modern and premodern lives of kings and other things. There in the Great Hall, Isaac’s circumcision still calls for a witness. What it asks of us, or at least asked of me, is to respond to the reverse typology carried out by the picture qua iconographic exercise; to inventory the mutations in the softscape undergone by these tapestries over time; and to work toward a phenomenology of fabric worlds that would account for both the meanings and the affordances of these great woven dinosaurs in the museum of modern art.

And perhaps these tapestries ask even more. What would a phenomenology of the softscape look like now, a now defined not by a covenanting God, a polygamous king, or a constitutional dictator but by an object world overwhelmingly determined by commodification, global labor practices, and the ecological eschaton? Such a phenomenology, which would also be a biopolitics and a political theology, might ask us to master the arts of installation (the D.I.Y. movement), to choose disassembly over abandonment (recycling and repurposing), to practice curation (an ethics of care), and to enter new scenes of publicity and scholarly exchange (social media, including this journal) in order to exercise the virtues of human appearing (Arendt’s vita activa). Bruno Latour calls it “reassembling the social.” Anthony Grafton calls it the Republic of Letters. I like to call it the design of life.74

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