MODERN FRENCH TAPESTRIES

By WILLIAM S. LIEBERMAN

The Museum of Modern Art

In the current loan exhibition of French tapestries six galleries have been devoted to hangings woven during the last decade after designs by prominent contemporary artists. It is the first time this renascent art has been shown in any representative manner to the American public. The accompanying discussion, with its illustrations, provides a more thorough introduction to a generally unfamiliar subject than was possible within the limits of the handbook to the exhibition.—Editor

The original purpose of tapestry was functional: to supply wall hangings which would keep castles and churches free from draft, to provide portable partitions, and to decorate large areas of bare wall. As these functions were superseded, the great mediaeval tradition of tapestry declined. By 1700, with the nationalization of the Gobelins and Beauvais factories, tapestry design had degenerated into imitation of painting in oil. Jean Baptiste Oudry, an eighteenth-century director of the Gobelins, could instruct his workshops: "You must not persist in employing the colors of tapestry; instead, you must give your work all the spirit and intelligence of painting—this is the secret of making beautiful tapestries."

Although the weavers of the fourteenth-century Angers Apocalypse series used at most twenty-five shades of color, the Gobelins workshops under Le Brun, Oudry, and Boucher employed over 150 intermediary tints and, by the end of the nineteenth century, could match the 14,000 hues charted by Michel Chevreul. The fineness of the weave itself also increased, from five and six threads per centimeter in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to ten threads per centimeter in the twentieth. The expense of matching colors and the man-hour cost of weaving became exorbitant. Technical proficiency and incompetent design had transformed tapestry into a bulky stepsister of painting.

At the close of the nineteenth century a few painters, among them Van Gogh's friend Emile Bernard, interested themselves in tapestry, but their isolated experiments remained tentative. Aristide Maillol, fascinated by the possibilities of the medium, employed for a time a group of weavers. His success as a designer, however, was abruptly cut short by failing eyesight, and he was forced to direct all his energies to sculpture.

The national factories, usually waiting until the artist had died, attempted copies of paintings by Manet, Redon, Cézanne, even Monet's Nymphéas. In the 1920's Beauvais requested cartoons from Raoul Dufy and Charles Dufresne, but their designs, used for furniture coverings and wall hangings, were executed in a weave so fine as to resemble petit point. In general, however, when not reworking eighteenth-century cartoons, Beauvais, the Gobelins, and the private workshops at Aubusson produced excellent imitations of bad academic genre scenes, tasteless latter-day reconstructions of historic moments, or, if desired, the Lady and the Unicorn panels at a quarter the size and four times the detail of the original. As Jean Lurçat said, "The art had died, killed by consumption, insipidness, lymphatism, and inversion."

The pioneer of today's tapestry revival was the atelier established in 1930 by Marie Cuttolo, wife of the French senator from Algeria. A gracious and spirited patron of the arts, she commissioned designs from masters of the modern movement: Braque, Derain, Dufy, Le Corbusier, Léger, Matisse, Miró, Picasso, Rouault, and Utrillo. By 1936 Mme Cuttolo's weavers had completed sixteen tapestries, which were exhibited in Paris, Brussels, Stockholm, London, and extensively in the United States.

Dufy and Lurçat had worked in tapestry before, but few of the other artists developed any real interest in the medium. With the exception of Lurçat and Miró, the artists submitted
oil paintings for cartoons. The weavers' task was once again to reproduce a painting—a fault of the commissioned artist rather than the program. As faithful executions many of the tapiseries were magnificent, but too often the artist's greatest concession to the medium was a decorative border framing the composition. The sumptuous colors and thick impasto of Rouault's oils were splendidly rendered, but as with any copy the original surpassed the imitation. Picasso, usually quick to seize the possibilities of a technique, seems to have been fascinated by the weavers' skill and tested their virtuosity by using collage, pieces of paper and cloth applied to the surface of a painting. The innately gay and decorative panoramas of Dufy translated more easily, but perhaps the most successful renderings were the simple abstract designs of the Spanish painter Joan Miró.

The important contribution of the atelier Cuttoli was its break with the commonplace design fostered by the great tapestry houses. For the first time in two hundred years leading contemporary painters were engaged as tapestry designers. The impetus for a revival had been given, the pioneer work to a large extent done. Needed, however, was a careful re-examination of the new, or rather lapsed, aesthetic of tapestry, as well as a program larger than could be attempted by any individual.

As early as 1916 the painter Jean Lurçat had been interested in the possibilities of using woven materials. His first efforts were petit-point copies of water colors and paintings stitched by his wife and his mother. Lurçat studied various techniques of embroidery and weaving and designed some fabrics and rugs. About 1930, dissatisfied with these attempts, he began to experiment with high- and low-warp looms. By 1933 he had become one of the first and most successful designers commissioned by Mme Cuttoli. Recognizing the art of tapestry as completely distinct from that of painting, Lurçat set out to reaffirm its independence. In order to exploit rather than to deny the qualities inherent in the medium, he tried to return to the great mediaeval tradition. His researches were confirmed in 1937, when he saw for the first time the great Apocolypse at Angers.

The design and manufacture of tapestry, Lurçat decided, must be simplified. The artist should realize that tapestry, unlike painting, is unsuited to modeling, renditions of depth and perspective, or many gradations of color; that stylization is necessary; that colors to appear best should be few, opaque, and juxtaposed. Above all, one of the original purposes of tapestry, the decoration of large areas of wall, should not be forgotten.

Stifled by incompetent design and the ex-
pence of manufacture, the tapestry houses themselves were ready for change. In 1936 Guillaume Janneau, director of the Mobilier National of Gobelins and Beauvais, and François Tabard, head of one of the oldest Aubusson ateliers, approached Lurçat. After much discussion a program was outlined. Lurçat and Dufy sent cartoons to Aubusson; in 1937 Gobelins commissioned a large tapestry from Lurçat and, a year later, four panels depicting The Elements from Marcel Gromaire; finally, in the fall of 1939, the Government arranged that Lurçat, Gromaire, and Pierre Dubreuil go to Aubusson to study, create, and supervise.

Of the three great houses Aubusson was the natural choice for the rejuvenation of the industry. Its low-warp looms, already used by Mme Cuttoli, were quicker and cheaper to operate than the high-warp looms of Gobelins; its weave was traditionally coarser than that of Gobelins or Beauvais; and at Aubusson was the atelier of François Tabard, who was in complete sympathy with what Lurçat was trying to do. Work was immediately begun on four cartoons requested from each of the three artists: The Seasons from Lurçat, the same subject from Gromaire, and The Gardens by Dubreuil. Other artists were attracted to Aubusson, and with the 1941 armistice in France work was begun in earnest; the revival was under way.

Two technical innovations characterize modern tapestries: a limited range of colors and a coarse weave. The artists restrict themselves to between twenty and forty shades, Lurçat using no more than thirty-four for all his designs, Gromaire only about twenty. The colors of this limited palette have been numbered by Lurçat, thus eliminating the time-consuming matching of shades. Since 1939 the seventy-five weavers of the various Aubusson ateliers have used the same chart of numbered colors (tons comptés) for all of his tapestries: 1-6, gradations of yel-
The Origin of the Mercenary Soldier. Designed by Jean Lurçat and woven by Jansen at Aubusson in 1946. H. 7 feet 5 inches. Private collection, Paris. This work is a commentary on Nazi warfare. The two end panels show Nazi and mediaeval instruments of torture; the center panels, the horse of Death (at the left), symbolizing the destruction of such cities as Guernica and Oradour, and (at the right) a satire on Göring's love of arms and armor.

Lurçat is the master and chief propagandis of the revival. More than any other artist he has formulated and encouraged the program that has guided the industry. He insists upon a clear distinction between the painter's brush and the weaver's bobbin, between easel painting and mural decoration. If tapestry is not to imitate painting it must be conceived in its own language. The artist should assume responsibility not only for the design but for its execution. Lurçat draws a cartoon in black and white with the colors designated for the weaver by number. The cartoon is completely thought out in detail in terms of tapestry: bold, rela-

low; 7-11, gradations of gray; 12-16, gradations of ocher; R, RF, light and dark hues of cadmium red; two greens; B, white; N, black; two blues; 30-34, a range of salmon reds. Whenever possible vegetable dyes are used. The weave itself—slightly coarser than that of most fifteenth-century tapestries—is the point robuste, about five woolen threads per centimeter. Silk is never mixed with wool, nor is any other attempt made to hide the weave by increasing its fineness. The coarse weave and the restricted range of colors reduce considerably the cost of manufacture and, from the point of view of design, mark a return to mediaeval custom.

147
tively simple design; conventionalized, often schematic, treatment of forms and space; awareness of the mural implications as well as the restrictions of the medium itself. Lurçat’s flat backgrounds, usually of solid colors, unify composition and silhouette shapes. Another characteristic of his style is the dramatic juxtaposition of contrasting colors.

Marcel Gromaire, prominent in the revival since its inception, continues a peculiarly French tradition of painter decorator. His designs are crowded with fancy. Almost unrelieved in their detail, his tapestries often resemble mosaic. Each form is outlined in black, and he turns away from the warm, rich colors of Lurçat.

Like Gromaire and Lurçat, Raoul Dufy is a painter of established reputation. Although he has been less prolific as a tapestry designer, his large compositions sparkle with brilliance, color, and wit. Derain and Matisse have only recently begun to experiment seriously with the medium, and of some twenty-five younger designers the most active is Marc Saint-Saëns, who was frequently commissioned as a muralist before joining the revival. Other designers of importance or promise are Lucien Coutaud, Maurice Brachon, Maurice Savin, Vincent Guignebert, and Jean Picart le Doux.

The subject matter of modern tapestry leans heavily on mediaeval precedent: occupations and pleasures of the field and garden; allegories of the elements, arts, and seasons; the poetry of verdure. Lurçat favors the banderoles and lettered patterns of the fifteenth century and often incorporates into his designs poetic fragments from Apollinaire, Éluard, and Aragon. Birds, beasts, even the bull and minotaur that haunt modern iconography are frequent motifs, while city and country vistas romanticize certain aspects of contemporary life. With the exception of Matisse, no recent designer has been tempted to explore the possibilities of abstract composition. This is surprising, especially since the tapestries made from Miró’s abstract designs were among the best produced by Mme Cuttoli.

If the revival is to become a renaissance it must have more than one or two masters. So far the designers have been painters, and only a few have submitted successfully to the discipline imposed by the medium. To be a competent tapestry designer a painter must acquire training and experience. He must also assume the outlook of the artisan and to a large extent redirect his art. Unfortunately, even with the necessary knowledge of the weaver’s craft, technical restrictions curtail the freedom of expression possible in painting.

The revival is scarcely ten years old. How long its vitality will continue depends not only on the artists but on the patronage they receive. The demand for large wall hangings is limited. To acquire any measure of popular support in these times of apartments and small houses, tapestry may be forced to make further concession as to size. Moreover, government sponsorship is not enough. Industry and, once again, the Church can act as patrons. Already the Cathedral of Dijon and the church at Assy have commissioned works, while the Museum of Wine at Beaune has furnished an example of the patronage industry might provide.