

# 20th CENTURY AUBUSSON TAPESTRIES

AUBUSSON tapestries of the 20th century, which were shown at the Cultural Division of the French Embassy in New York recently, are representative of the work of the leading French artists, including such master designers as Jean Lurçat, Marc Saint-Saens, Lenormand, Jean Picart LeDoux, Pauline Peugniez, Maurice Savin, Vincent Guignebert, and others who have become distinguished for their designs for this ancient medium. Following the exhibition at the Cultural Division, the tapestries were shown at the galleries of the Associated American Artists and a selection at Georg Jensen's on Fifth Avenue as well as in Washington, D. C. They will go on tour in the fall and will be seen in Philadelphia, Kansas City, Dallas, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit,

and San Francisco, with exact dates to be announced later.

While one or two of these works had been shown in the great exhibition of ancient and modern French tapestries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1948, the majority were exhibited here for the first time. New designs will be added for the fall exhibitions, according to Fred Jellinek, who is in charge of these exhibitions in the United States.

Tapestry making was a flourishing art and craft in France from the 13th through the 18th centuries, every century having its own taste and style. Medieval and Renaissance designers created original cartoons, keeping in mind the limitations of the loom, and restricting their color range to 20 or 30 shades. By the 18th century, how-

ever, the trend was toward making the tapestry an imitation of a painting. Instead of producing original designs, tapestry cartoonists copied paintings and used as many as 600 shades in a single hanging.

About fifteen years ago a handful of French painters undertook to restore to this ancient craft its original character by designing tapestries in the tradition of the Middle Ages, limiting themselves to about 40 colors and to designs adapted to the loom rather than the paint brush. The subject matter and forms, however, were in no way imitations or copies of the older works, but were decidedly 20th century in character, and in keeping with modern homes and buildings. For modern tapestries, like their predecessors, are not designed only



*"La Chasse" by Maurice Savin, to be shown in the United States for the first time this fall.*



*"La Musique" by Jean Picart Le*



*Artists working on cartoon for tapestry.*

for display in museums or art galleries but to be lived with from day to day.

This collection of French tapestries, critics pointed out, indicated that the painters had advanced greatly in the art of designing for the loom, adapting their cartoons to the character of the tapestry medium. They are not re-using easel paintings in their designs, but approaching an ancient technique with freshness and vigor which has significance for all French art.

While one finds "mille fleurs" and other designs reminiscent of the medieval period, nevertheless they are not simply a "rehashed version," according

to Aline Louchheim in the *New York Times*. The artists, she says, are meeting a new challenge on its own terms and bringing to it the "imagination, creative ability, and mastery over materials" which are their individual gifts.

While most of the subjects are contemporary, they are nevertheless treated with something of the fantasy, unreality, and grotesque humor to be found in the medieval designs. Figures in the modern hangings often recall the humorous approach of some of the old tapestry cartoonists to their heroic subjects. Often one finds a figure, in the midst of heroic medieval pageantry, presenting a most



*Putting warp on the loom.*



*Weavers at work on tapestry.*

*Removing the finished piece.*



*Finishing the tapestry on the loom.*



unheroic aspect and regarding the scene with an expression of amused, yet tolerant, cynicism, showing that the ancient craftsmen were not above spoofing their noble patrons. In this group the lady and the sunflowers by Marc Saint-Saens presents a reminiscent design in a modern interpretation. Lurçat, leader in the movement to create designs for tapestries alone, has a great deal of the medieval spirit which is reflected in the famous gargoyles of Notre Dame and the grotesque figures of men, birds, and animals which often appear in the midst of carvings of the saints. He is represented here by two most interesting small pieces, done in tones of dark

brown and gray which create an air of mystery. His Siamese cat in the midnight garden is entrancing.

At Aubusson tapestries are woven today as they were hundreds of years ago. The artist first draws his cartoon on a heroic scale, which the weaver must reproduce in wool on the loom. The wool comes from sheep raised in the surrounding country and is spun and dyed especially for the tapestries. Water from the river close by is considered to have special virtues in dyeing and finishing.

Aubusson weavers use a low warp or horizontal loom. As in tapestry weaving generally, when the piece is finished, all

warp threads are completely covered. The artist's cartoon, marked off in sections to show colors, is placed inside the frame of the loom next to the weaver, below the warp, and he uses a mirror to see the pattern as it develops. The "flute" or bobbin is used rather than the more familiar shuttle. Gobelin tapestries are woven on high warp or vertical looms.

In the ancient tapestries, it is said, low warp can be distinguished from those made on high warp looms from traces of the weavers' beards which often are found on the wrong side. The medieval weavers were bearded and as they bent over the loom often wove their beards in with the pattern.

The present day Gobelin factory is entirely subsidized by the French government while the Aubusson establishment receives only a partial subsidy. Workers are paid a higher wage by the Gobelin concern, which raises the price of contemporary works beyond the range of almost all purchasers except the French Government which is the exclusive customer at present.

The government purchases many Aubussons, however, which have been placed in many embassies and consulates abroad and are selected for official gifts. One recently was presented to the Emperor of Afghanistan. Many are sold to private purchasers in France, Switzerland, England, the Scandinavian countries, South America, and the United States. Prices now range from \$600 to \$2,000 for the sizes shown in this country, compared to from \$5,000 to \$9,000 which were quoted in 1947. About a year's time is required to weave the larger tapestries illustrated here.

Since modern tapestry represents a flexible form of wall decoration for use in interior design, American artists, architects, and weavers should become more interested in its possibilities for wider use, Mr. Jellinek believes. Tapestries are more practical than mural paintings for wall decorations, since they can be moved easily in case of alterations and also can be preserved in case of building demolition. Fine murals have been lost because they were an integral part of the wall. He also hopes to interest some American artists and weavers in designing for the Aubusson looms.



"C'est l'Aube" by Jean Lurçat.



"Les Cartes" by Robert Henry.

"Le Magazin Pittoresque" by Jacques LaGrange.

