

## FRENCH TAPESTRY TODAY

BY

MADELEINE JARRY

I N 1923, Mme Cuttoli started her campaign to revive the art of tapestry by having the works of such painters as Rouault, Picasso, Braque, and Miro woven at Aubusson. Lurçat also provided a cartoon, and was thus involved in the enterprise from its inception. He can indeed be said to have devoted his life to the rebirth of tapestry; the brilliant renaissance of this art after the second World War in France and, in fact, the whole world, was certainly due to this great artist. But the style of tapestry has undergone a marked change since the general development initiated by Lurçat; evolution has continued apace and the works produced ten years ago are now outgrown and seem almost old-fashioned. What has been woven in the last few years at the Gobelins, at Beauvais, and at Aubusson?<sup>1</sup> What trends are apparent in French tapestry today?

*The Contemporaneity of Lurçat, Le Corbusier, and Adam.*

A remarkable fact must first be pointed out: three great artists now deceased, Lurçat, Le Corbusier, and Adam, are still of major importance. Nothing can be said or written about contemporary tapestry without mentioning the continuing success of their woven designs.

When Jean Lurçat died at Saint Paul de Vence in 1966, the renaissance of tapestry was an accomplished fact. His magnificent *Song of the World* (*Tenture du Chant du Monde*), exhibited in the Hospice Saint Jean at Angers, not far from the famous fourteenth-century *Apocalypse*, dominates the art of tapestry today. The school of cartoon-painters influenced by him (Picart le Doux, Saint Saëns, Dom Robert, and others) continues to flourish.

Another important body of work by a cartoon-painter is that produced by Le Corbusier. Between the last war and his death in 1965, the great architect designed many tapestries, which he called "traveler's murals" (*le Mural du Nomade*). Several of these tapestries were woven at Beauvais in 1967 and 1968, including the *Woman and the Farrier* (*la Femme et le Maréchal*-

*Ferrant*) (Pl. 1) and the *Tripotent Bull (le Taureau trivalent)*. The figures are not modeled, as only pure tones are used; the artist has given the major rôle to the outlines.

Henri Georges Adam, sculptor, engraver, and cartoon-painter, who died in 1967, still holds an outstanding position in the world of tapestries. His hangings are woven with black and white wools only; grays are produced by alternating the two threads in varying proportions. A dozen different values can be obtained with this "thread by thread" (*fil à fil*) technique. Among Adam's last creations are *Meridian (Méri dien)*, woven at Beauvais in 1966 and again in 1967, and three hangings for a triptych called *Mont Saint Michel*, made at the Gobelins in 1967. (Pl. 2)

#### *Technical Research*

Enormous vitality characterizes contemporary tapestry; innumerable artists have been intrigued by the temptation of seeing their ideas woven on the tapestry-loom. Their tapestries are the result of joint research on the part of the artist and of the technician, the weaver. The compositions of Vasarely form a special category (Pl. 3). His very individual art gives an illusion of actual movement. This artist's study of optical science has enabled him to produce mechanical, almost machine-made pseudo-plastic forms. The pure colors that he prefers to mixed threads are not related to any three-dimensional effects, but merely follow the drawing rigorously. Sharp contours and pure tones are also characteristic of the artists belonging to the Galerie Denise René group: Magnelli, Dewasne, Deyrolle, Arp, Mortensen, Sonia Delaunay. Here one finds a magnificent extension of abstract art, but uncomplicated weaving, since only geometrical forms are involved, with few colors, though brilliant and strongly contrasted.

It is, however, true that at the present moment both artists and weavers have become primarily concerned with experiments in the actual weaving process. Some countries, such as Poland and Yugoslavia, have produced daring creations, tapestries conceived as functions of their materials, such as wools and threads of other fibers, differing greatly in thickness. The artists, often women, weave their projects themselves; they avoid an even surface, so that the work acquires actual relief. While on this subject, the French experiments in technique carried out in the Saint Cyr workshop near Melun should be mentioned. This center is directed by the young artist-weaver, Daquin, who learned the craft in the National Manufactories. He uses all the resources of weaving, but can combine them, even in a single work, with other techniques. A tapestry can become a structured object, evoking a spatial form; one of his creations is indeed called *Mospalis*, from *Mo* (mobile) and *spalis* (space).

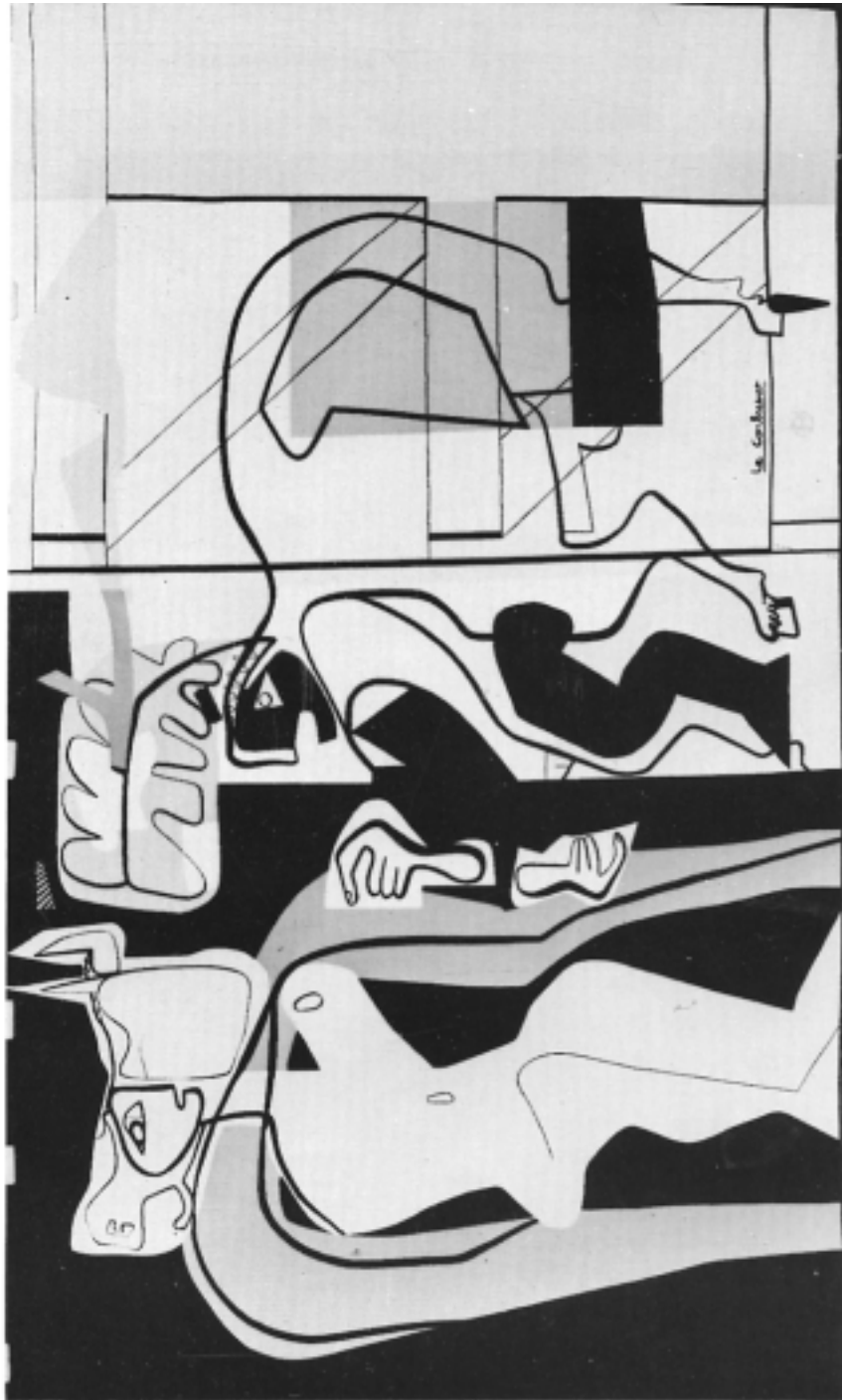


Plate 1. The Woman and the Farrier (*La Femme et le Maréchal-Ferrant*),  
Beauvais tapestry after Le Corbusier, 1967. 2.17 m. x 3.62 m.



Plate 2. Mont St. Michel.  
Gobelins tapestry after Georges Henri Adam, 1965. 4.02 m. x 5.65 m.

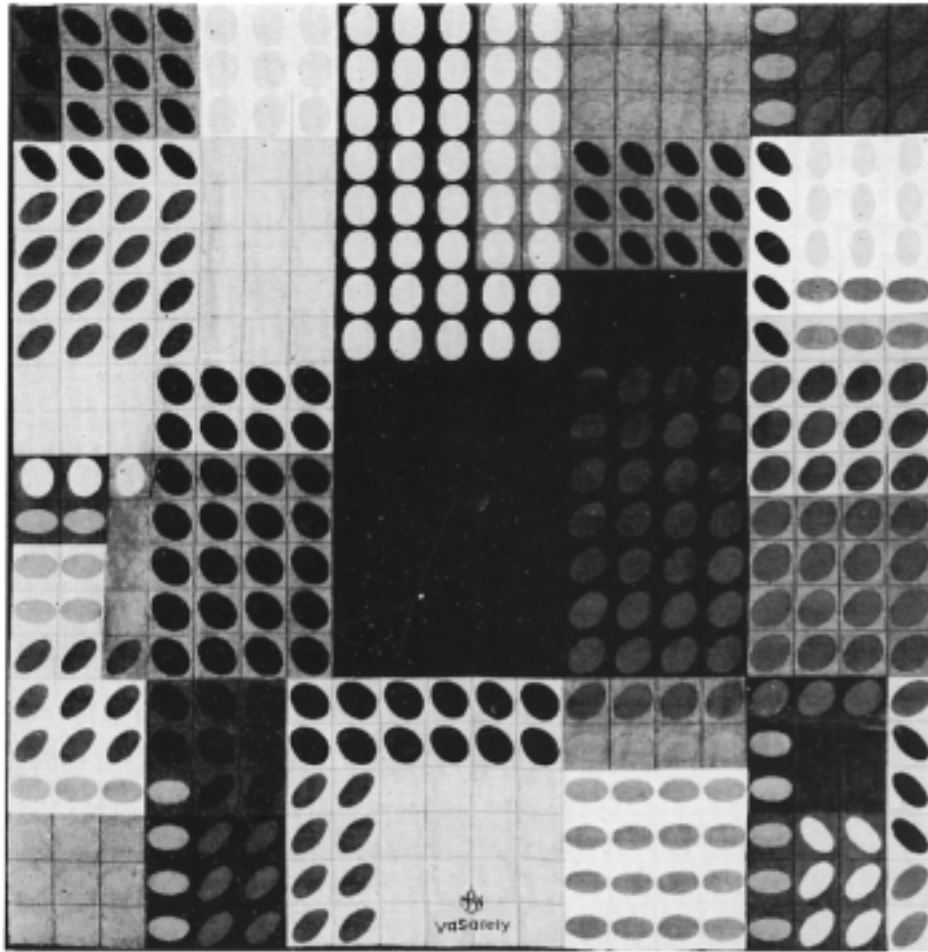


Plate 3. Heckla.

Beauvais tapestry after Vasarely, third weaving. 2.03 m. x 1.97 m.

Nevertheless, tapestry has remained in France and Belgium basically “fine weaving” (*beau tissage*), not a peasant craft, carried out to perfection by professionally expert weavers. All experiments are devoted to discovering the full range of what can be done with colored wools; to this end, the technical processes known as hatchings and hactures (*battages*), insertions (*sertis*), shadings down (*dégradés*), effects achieved by the single passage of the weft (*effets de demi-duite*), and the same thread-by-thread treatment producing shaded stripes (*fil à fil*) are employed; these tricks of the weaver’s trade give increased richness and variety to the actual texture of the fabric.

Some great artists, interested in tapestry as a form of mural decoration, leave these experiments to the skill of the weavers who interpret their designs; others are painters by profession, but weavers in spirit, and have a profound knowledge of wool and its possibilities.

#### *Specialist Tapestry Painters*

Those painters who can be called specialists in tapestry bring, not only a new esthetic, but also a renewed technique, to the craft. The characteristic properties of wool enhance the play of colors, giving an additional element of beauty to a work executed in tapestry; these artists know how to take advantage of all such resources offered them by the material and by the loom. The cartoons entrusted to the weavers, whether the colors are painted or indicated by a system of numbers, are exact preconceptions of every aspect of the finished weaving.

Matégot has revived the medieval process called *piqué*, a mixture of threads of different hues and intensities; he thereby achieves subtle gradations and effects of iridescence, uniquely his own.

The tapestries of Prassinos (Pl. 4) exalt and transfigure the world; in his compositions, based on numbered cartoons in black and white, any suggestion of volume disappears in favor of the handwriting of the “message”.

Tourlière, Director of the National School of Decorative Art at Aubusson, makes use of everything the loom can do; wool and its color effects are the foundation of all his work. He arrives at his results by means of a rhythmical *piqué* in irregular bands and obtains effects of striation admirably suited to the subjects he evokes, fields of grain or the rows of vineyards.

The most recent series of another artist, Jullien, called *From Dawn to Day-Break* (*de l’Aube à l’Aurore*), shows how far he has carried his research; the weaving, which brings out the thickness of some wefts by contrasting them



Plate 4. **Romeo and Juliet.**  
Gobelins tapestry after Mario Prassinos, 1967. 3.95 m. x 5.58 m.

with thin ones, has an effect of relief that enlivens the surface. Singier, whose work has been called "quiet as a Sung painting," is also no stranger to technical research. The same can be said of Wogensky, who was introduced to the loom by Lurçat; his abstract compositions have an astonishing luxuriance of color.

The works of such artists as Lagrange, Longobardi, Millecamps, Schumacher, Brivet, Maurice André, Odette Blanc Falaize, Monique Aradon, and others also deserve mention in this unfortunately far too hasty survey. The achievements of most of these painters, whether woven in the National Manufactories or at Aubusson, have become familiar through the frequent and varied exhibitions held at the art gallery "La Demeure" in Paris, directed by Mme. Denise Majorel.

#### *Tapestries as Translations of Paintings*

It is now more than thirty-five years since Mme. Cuttoli had the works of great masters copied in tapestry-weaving; shortly after the war, tapestries were made after Matisse's pasted papers (*papiers collés*); Picasso's *Guernica* has been woven in the Beaume-Dürnbach workshops. These hangings were not mere reproductions of easel-paintings, but were planned as mural decorations.

To interpret the creations of these celebrated artists calls for great skill on the part of the weaver, since he must not falsify the style of the work entrusted to him. The private workshops of Plasse le Caisne and Cauquil Prince make tapestries from simple sketches by the painters. In the National Manufactories, there has also been much research into the methods of interpreting the works of such artists as Chagall (Pl. 5), Atlan, Beaudin, Gilioli (Pl. 6), Hartung, Masson, Mathieu (Pl. 7), Miro, Picasso, Riopelle, de Staël, Seuphor, Ubac (Pl. 8), and Vieira da Silva (Pl. 9).

The weavers usually have as their starting point a sketch, a lithograph, or a small version of the design. A photographic enlargement is used to provide the full-scale cartoon. This process can bring about changes, not only in the large color areas, but also in details, whose importance may become over-emphasized. The weaver is therefore obliged to re-establish the individual style of each artist by simplifying and modifying the exaggeration caused by the photographic enlargement. This holds good not only for the drawing, but also for the colors. Interpreting the artist's work in this way leads the weaver into continuous research, so that his techniques are constantly expanded. Many attempts to render the color schemes of Chagall's palette preceded the execution of his three large tapestries, the *Creation* (Pl. 5), *Exodus*, and the *Entry into Jerusalem*. Much of Atlan's *Festival (la Fête)* was woven by





Plate 5. The Creation.  
Gobelins tapestry after Marc Chagall, 1967. 4.65 m. x 5.38 m.

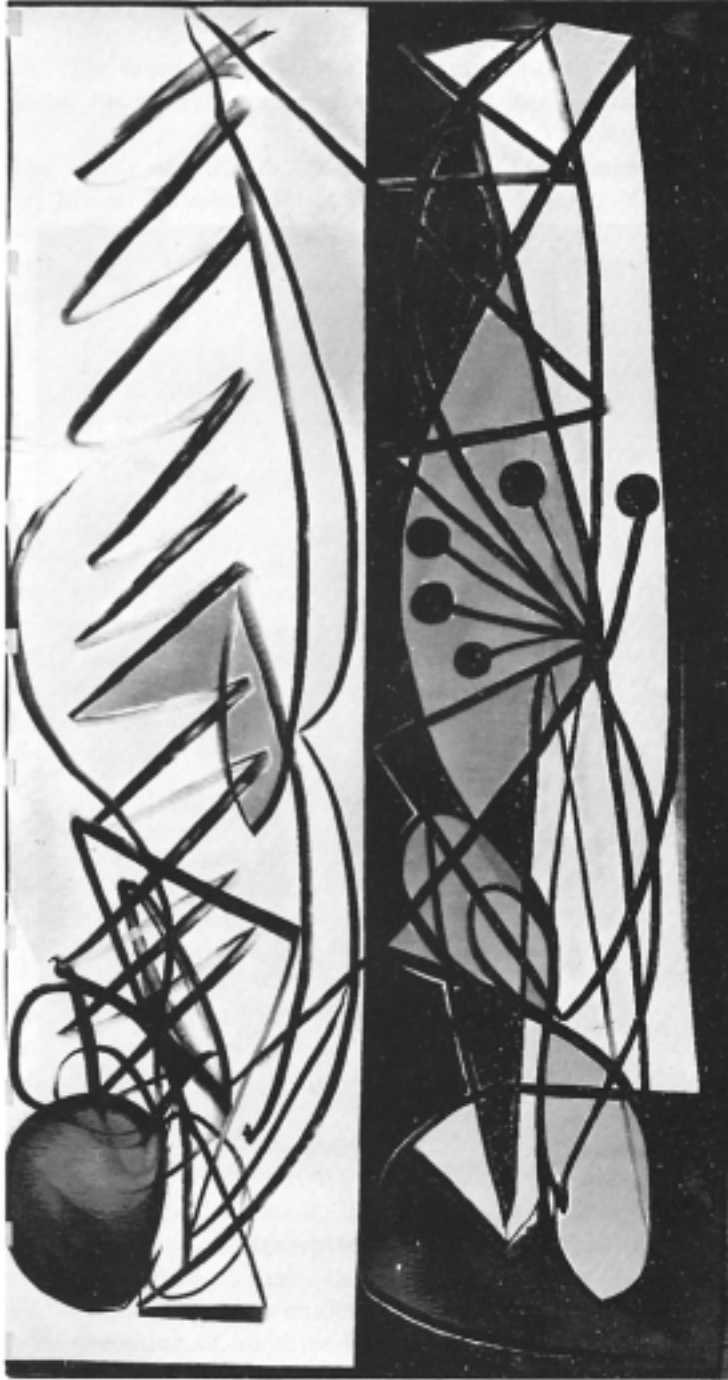


Plate 6. The Sleeping Women (*Les Dormeuses*).  
Beauvais tapestry after Emile Gilioli, 1966. 2.80 m. x 5.44 m.

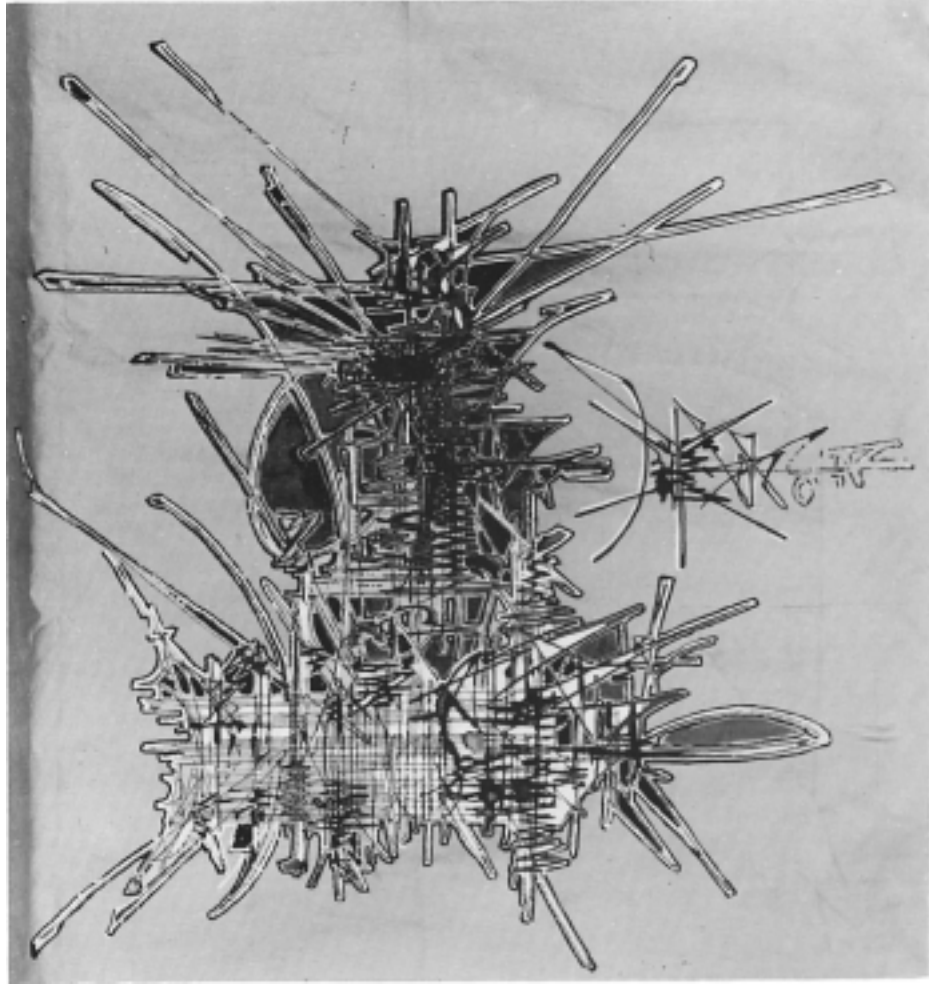


Plate 7. Homage to Nicolas Fouquet.  
Gobelins tapestry after Georges Mathieu, 1967. 4.90 m. x 4.90 m.

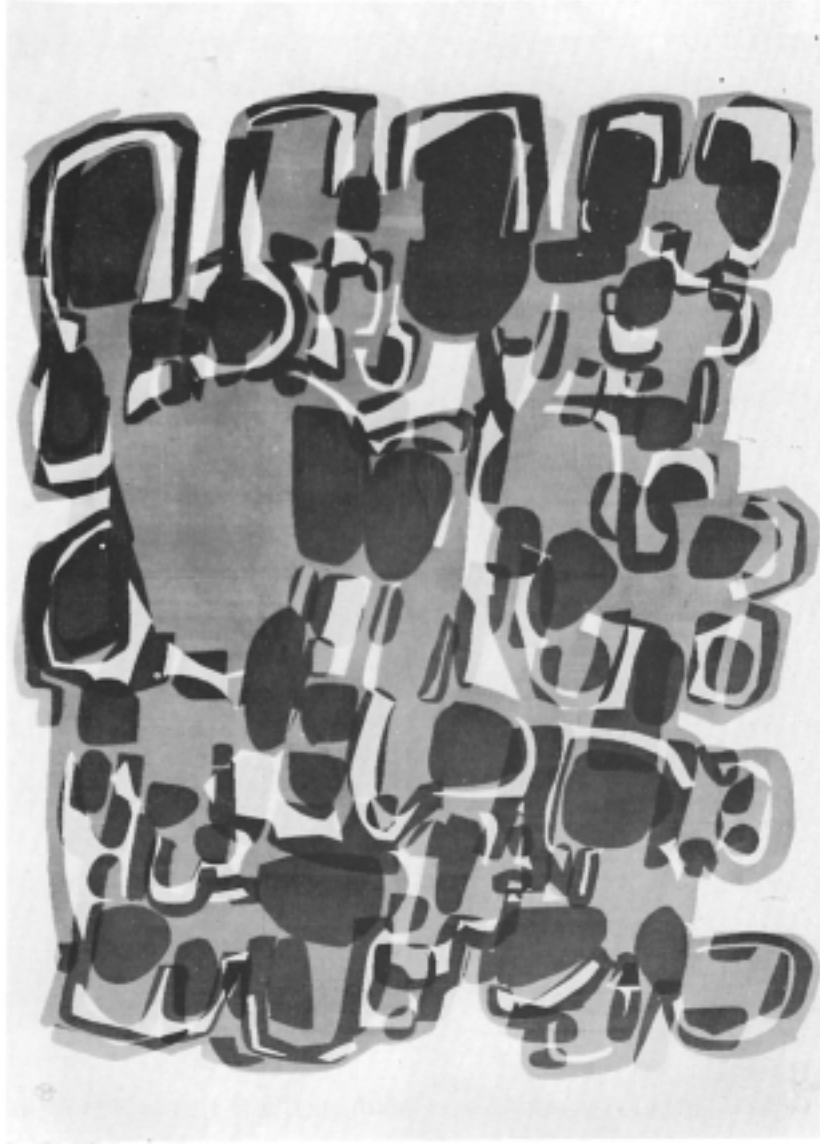


Plate 8. Red and Blue Forms (*Formes rouges et bleues*).  
Beauvais tapestry after Raoul Ubac, 1968, second weaving, 3.05 m. x  
2.40 m.

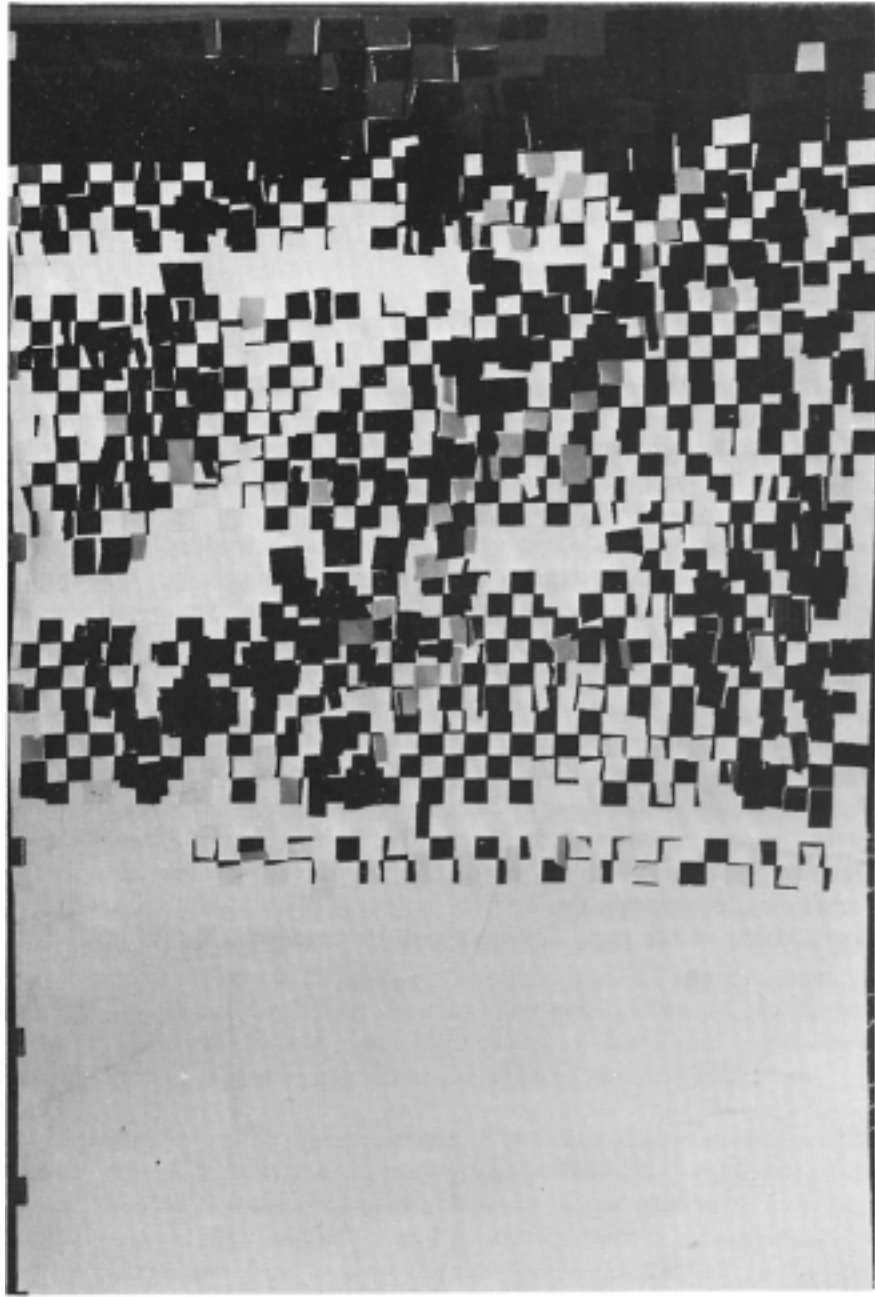


Plate 9. Panel No. 3.  
Beauvais tapestry after Vieira da Silva, 1967. 4.62 m. x 3.15 m.

the process known as single passage of the weft (*demi-uite*), which gives an effect of vibrating color.

The high quality of the tapestries woven in the National Manufactories is universally recognized; the technical ability of the weavers is due to the professional training they receive, which enables them to reproduce on the loom the red chalk and charcoal drawings of Riopelle as successfully as the subtle compositions of Vieira da Silva (Pl. 9). Two amazing tapestries after the *tachiste* painter Mathieu are among the most recent productions of the Gobelins looms.<sup>1</sup>

*Will woven hangings replace mural painting?*

It is still too early to judge the esthetic value of contemporary tapestry, but one can speak of its success and of the enormous variety of its manifestations. Tapestries have regained an important function, thanks to the severely plain style of interior architecture today; as moveable and interchangeable decoration, they can be used as ornamental household objects, bringing modern art into daily life. Will tapestry gradually replace mural painting as the standard covering for walls? Hangings not especially woven, but made up of textile elements, are being used for this purpose more and more frequently. First Bissière, then Louttre, and now Claude Stahly have created magnificent works made of pieces of cloth simply sewn together. Alain Depuis has invented

a process that gives the appearance of weaving; he has reproduced the compositions of Chevalley, Kermarec, and Fleury by applying woolen threads on a cloth framework (exhibited at the Suzy Langlois Gallery in Paris.) Dubuffet's "tapestries," shown recently at the Decorative Arts Museum, Paris, are made with pasted woolen threads by Carmon. Younger sisters of traditional tapestries, these creations demonstrate the interest in textile adaptations shown by contemporary artists of the most divergent stylistic tendencies.

Madeleine Jarry

<sup>1</sup> The Gobelins National Manufactory and the Beauvais National Manufactory belong to the French State; their tapestries are not for sale. The Aubusson workshops are privately owned and their productions are sold commercially.