

The Revival of Textile Arts at the End of the 19th Century and the Beginning of the 20th Century

Valentina ȘTEFĂNESCU¹

Abstract: *The revival of textile arts has been a long process throughout which the searches, the questions and the answers were seen as small victories. Each step taken by the textile artists of the end of the 19th century has led to a change of vision and any struggle has led little by little to answers and solutions. Due to the artistic, social, political events, the start of the 20th century has led to change, revival and meditation on the glory age of tapestry art. The textile artists have evolved through the vision of the Bauhaus School, led by Jean Lurçat and Magdalena Abakanowicz, when everything gained an entirely different form due to the studies on textures, colours and three-dimensional shaping ability.*

Key-words: *textile arts, tapestry, recovery, study, pioneering, old values.*

1. Introduction

Tapestry is mainly a European art, developed since the beginning of the Middle Ages, especially in France and Flanders. Its golden age lasted up to the beginning of the 18th century, then declining around the end of this century. The decline lasted more than a hundred years.

In *The Encyclopaedia of Arts, Crafts and Sciences*, Diderot defined tapestry as being “a piece of textile used for decorating a bedroom or any other room of the house. This set may be made of any kind of fabrics: satin, brocade, etc.”² This is the reflection of the stage in which tapestry found itself in the 18th century, when, from the heroic and heraldic richness of Gothic times, from the status of unique and precious work of art, it became a little more than a domestic decoration (drapes, curtains, etc.).

2. The Revival

The historic premises of transformations occurred in the field of tapestry starting with the 20th century represented the repeated attempts of artists, French especially, to direct the production of large manufactories, which was declining, towards a great freedom of conception and execution. The revival of the language of tapestry at the beginning of the 20th century became possible when it opposed the much-contested aesthetics that dominated the 19th century, transforming the tapestry in the weaved replica of a painting. Actually, it had started to rival with the easel painting since the 18th century. Oudry considered that the mission of this art would be to “express the spirit and the intelligence of oil paintings”³. In the 19th century, the production of the main tapestry centres showed a powerful decline especially because of the exaggerated search of pictorial effects to the disadvantage of the decorative nature. The wish to produce weaved paintings enforced the search of a multitude of nuances that could satisfy the fine transfer from a shade to another, the finesse of the thread and of the point, as well as

¹ Faculty of Arts and Design, West University of Timișoara, valentina.stefanescu@e-uvv.ro

² Pierre Verlet, Michel Florisoone, Adolf Hoffmeister, Francois Tabard. (1965). *The Art of Tapestry*. (pp.146). London: Thames and Hudson Publishing House.

³ Andre Kuenzi. (1973). *La Nouvelle Tapisserie*. Paris: Bibliothèque des arts. Genève: Editions de Bonvent, Genève.

the closeness to the model being very important and restricting any freedom of the craftsman. The decline was so obvious that it reached the denial of the own nature of tapestry and it is enough to mention the abundant production of still natures and landscapes, so finely weaved that could be framed and hanged, replacing the function of the painted painting.

Over the centuries, the tapestry always depended on the artistic movements of each period, including on the carton craftsmen who were mostly painters. Therefore, if the collaboration with the tapestry craftsman stopped, the tapestry depended on the painting ever since the moment when chemistry gained space in the field of stable dyes, if not even before this discovery. Besides this, the evolution of art always depended on the economic and social life, the writer John Ruskin stating in its paper *Modern Painters* (1843-1860) that the society was responsible for the decline of art during his time⁴. Therefore, besides the political and social situation, each artistic trend affected the evolution of tapestry as well, considering that these trends also changed from time to time due to the wish to return to values considered important in the history of mankind.

3. End of 19th century beginning of 20th century

The tapestry remained dependent on painting for almost two centuries, only to revive towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, when many types of chemical fibres and threads, automation and computerisation were discovered. A first step was made between 1870-1880 within the *Arts and Crafts*⁵ movement, when the revival of medieval crafts was attempted, crafts with qualities that consider the purity of conception, sobriety and balance, but also the technical recipes for dyeing and the types of weaving. William Morris, the founder of this movement, supported the revival of occupations, the unification of all arts and the art for all. He wanted to make the industrial technique available to the craftsman artist⁶. In 1881 William Morris was leading the Merton Abbey⁷ manufactory, and he tried to bring to the forefront allegoric topics and reduced to a certain extent the number of colours, but mainly produced printed textiles with vegetal patterns taken over from the tapestries and the manuscripts from the Middle Ages and Persia, in an overloaded representation⁸. Beside him, the Pre-Raphaelite painters, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), Sir Burne-Jones (1833-1898), created tapestry projects with subjects that translated the bible in pictures and brought the Middle Ages legends to life. However, the conditions of tapestry revival at the end of the 19th century were not clear.

Within *Art 1900*, the symbolist painter Emile Bernard (1868-1941) created haute-lisse tapestries since 1890, and the sculptor Aristide Maillol (1861-1944)⁹, inspired by the medieval

⁴ Patricia Fride Carrassat and Isabelle Marcade. (2007). *Mișcări artistice în pictură* (pp. 60). București: Editura Enciclopedia RAO.

⁵ The *Arts and Crafts* movement was started in 1862, in England, by the ideologist and decorator William Morris (1834-1896), then it extended in Canada and the USA, as a search for authenticity and a reaction to the eclecticism of the Victorian era. The industrial revolution was one of the reasons why the movement appeared due to the marketing of the mass products. Actually, there was a controversial acceptance of mass products, because these promoted accessible and democratic prices, but, on the other hand, mass production was seen as a threat to creativity and individuality. The ideas of this movement influenced architecture, decorative arts and crafts. The most famous professionals were: William Morris, Charles Robert Ashbee, T.J. Cobden Sanderson, Elbert Hubbard, Walter Crane, Nelson Dawson, Phoebe Anna Traquair, Herbert Tudor Buckland, Charles Rennie, Edwin Lutyens, William De Morgan, Ernest Gimson, William Lethaby, Edward Schroeder, Frank Lloyd Wright, Gustav Stickley, Greene & Greene, Charles Voysey, Christopher Whall and the Pre-Raphaelite artists. In Europe, the movement influenced due to its simplicity and to the fabrics used, to designers like Henry van de Velde and to such movements like Art Nouveau, De Stijl, Vienna Secession, and to a certain extent Bauhaus.

⁶ Patricia Fride Carrassat and Isabelle Marcade, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁷ David Saxby. (2004). *William Morris and the Merton Abbey Works*, for the Merton Priory Trust, <http://www.mertonpriory.org/history/morris.html>, 11.02.2009.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 72.

⁹ Aristide Maillol started his artistic carrier in 1881, as a painter, becoming a member of the Les Nabis group in 1892, but continued as a sculptor since 1895, contributing to the writing of a new chapter in Art History. Gauguin encouraged this

tapestry, established a workshop in Banyuls sur Mer in 1893, where he painted his threads and weaved his projects on his own.¹⁰

In Germany, the *Secession* movement was beneficial to tapestry, with a manufactory of haute-lisse being established in Schredek that operated between 1896 and 1903.

The Art 1900 avant-garde in the field of decoration showed in other textile solutions, true omens of the evolution of today's tapestry, solutions that led to the use of new techniques, spectacularly exceeding the limits of the classic, such as the embroidered mural panels made by Herman Obrist (1863-1927), another representative of the Munich secession. In its exceptional creation, *Whiplash* (119 x 183cm in size, 1895), he achieved an abstract graphic construction, an embroidery with golden silk, strongly visible on a Kashmir wool background.

Using an original mixed technique, combining the embroidery and the lacing with wool and silk, with applications on cloth and fabric, which constitute the great coloured areas, the Belgian Henri Van de Velde (1863-1957) created in 1893 a polychromatic representational panel in the symbolist style of the *Les Nabis* group, entitled *The Angels' Watch* (140 x 233cm in size).¹¹

The Belgian Christoph de Neree, representative of the Dutch *Art 1900* (Nieve Kunst), used a new technique and created cartons that were embroidered with a large point on canvas.

In Austria, the tapestry was revived due to the actions of the *Wiener Werkstätte* workshops, between 1908 and 1914¹², these being known, in a way, as the *Viennese Arts and Crafts* movement, of course without the same power and share in the field of tapestry or the textile arts in general.

Like in many other fields, an important role in the revival of the European tapestry was played by *The Bauhaus School*. The first haute-lisse textiles with an expressionist, cubist, constructivist vision or, generally, following the spirit of abstractionism were produced by artists like Gunta Stolzl, Max Pfeiffer Watenphul, Paul Klee, Benita Otte Koch, starting with 1920.

The modern direction and the innovative trends of the textile workshop from Bauhaus did not stop at the design of carton, but they intervened in the technical part of tapestry production. Besides the knotted textile, other solutions and fabrics were used in experiments (hemp, tow, remains of fabrics, hemstitched textiles, a large variety of points, etc.), thus these approach manners showed the interest in experimenting with different fabrics from the point of view of the physical properties specific to fibres, such as the audible absorption and the light reflection. Similarly, at hundreds of kilometres distance from Aubusson, Marie Teinitzerova-Hoppeova (1879-1960)¹³, in her workshop from Hradec, Czechoslovakia, instinctively returned to a great sobriety of colours, visible in the tapestries designed for the Czech pavilion at the Exhibition of Decorative Arts, from Paris in 1925.

Paul Klee (1879-1940) defined the great direction of the new style of the works designed for soil and walls, the points used and their alternation supported the choice of materials, the varied colouring, emphasising the pattern games inspired from the folk tradition.

The course on shape and colour of Johannes Itten (1888-1967) considerably marked the achievements in the field. Ida Kerkovius (1879-1970) and Margareta Kohler emphasised the

complex artist's interest in tapestry. According to Ronald Alley. (1981) *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery's Collection of Modern Art other than Works by British Artists*. (pp. 465). London: Tate Gallery and Sotheby Parke-Bernet.

¹⁰ Paul Constantin. (1977). *Mică enciclopedie de arhitectură, arte decorative și aplicative moderne*. (pp.146). București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică.

¹¹ Paul Constantin, *op.cit.*, pp. 146.

¹² Gordon Campbell. (2006). *The Grove Encyclopedia of Decorative Arts*. vol. 2. (pp.427). US: Oxford University Press.

¹³ M. Ivory. (2007). *Praag*. (pp. 132). ANWB Media Boeken.

contrast between clarity and obscurity, defined by the ideologist, in the representation of the alternation of traditional materials (wool, cotton, silk and viscose).

Several years later, in 1933, artists of the time produced cartons for tapestry, trying to revive the genre – Raoul Dufy, André Derain, Fernand Léger, Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Georges Rouault, Jean Lurçat, Juan Miro. Most of them, without knowing the rules of the craft (except for Raoul Dufy), created oil paintings instead of cartons. The result was exceptional due to its accuracy and faithfulness, the weaved works revealing the most subtle chromatic harmony, but it was disappointing because it was impossible to distinguish the painted work from the weaved work. The action led to a dead end, at least reaching the conclusion that another way should be sought.

The artist Gunta Stolzl (1897-1983) assimilated and transposed in tapestry the great lessons of Paul Klee and Kandinski. The Swiss artist Sophie Tauber Arp (1889-1943) had similar visions, who „removed the huge mixture of styles that invaded the textile arts with their incoherence”, according to architect Max Bill¹⁴.

The creation of the people from Bauhaus and of Sophie Tauber Arp’s students, among whom there was Elsi Giauque (1900-1989), one of the pioneers of the new tapestry, fills a special place in the history of modern tapestry. With all the searches of these artists, in the rest of Europe people rarely talked about the experiment, and the tapestry was still dominated by the Art 1900 style.

The design of the true weaved work promoted by the architect Le Corbusier (1887-1965), interested in tapestry, stemmed from the art teacher and weaver Pierre Baudoin.

The architect considered that the tapestry should not be seen as a simple adornment, but it was integrated in architecture. “The destiny of current tapestry is that of being mural”¹⁵, stated Le Corbusier in his essay *Tapestries: Nomadic murals*. Its cartons showed an architectural nature, not dependent on the usual formulas of the occupation, he neglected the cross-hatch, the shades and the relief effects in favour of pure tones, mixed threads and solid lines of the drawing. Le Corbusier’s tapestries were created in agreement with its general theories on architecture and art of spatial planning.

Besides Le Corbusier, ideologist Victor Vasarely (1906-1997) was responsible for the experimental tapestries produced in Aubusson starting with 1949. In his opinion, terms like painter, sculptor or carton creator are anachronisms, because it was not about various manifestations of the creative spirit anymore, but especially about freeing the plastic feeling in different spatial limits.

In 1947 the Belgians Edmond Dubrunfaut, Louis Deltour and Roger Somville published *Forces murales: un art manifeste*, within the *Forces murales* group, the intentions being similar to those of the French painters who were carton craftsmen, one of the main points of debate being the leverage of the technique (in frescos, tapestry, stained glass, ceramics, etc.), taking part in the collective elaboration and collaborating with architects for a public art that agreed with the current requirements.¹⁶

Considered the main innovator of tapestry technique and terminology, Jean Lurçat (1892-1966) gave the tapestry, mainly, the mural function through an actual understanding of this art’s relation with architecture. Regaining the decorative and monumental nature was conditioned by the introduction of a technical reform meant to simplify the weaving procedures, in the spirit of its closeness to the means of creating the medieval tapestry. The contribution of Lurçat in this direction represented the reduction of the colour range to only

¹⁴ Paul Constantin. (1977). *Mică enciclopedie de arhitectură, arte decorative și aplicative moderne*. (pp.149). București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică.

¹⁵ Wendy Moonan. (September 28, 2001). *Le Corbusier Saw Tapestry As Part of Art*. (Section E, Page 38) <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/28/arts/antiques-le-corbusier-saw-tapestry-as-part-of-art.html>, 20.04.2008.

¹⁶ Jacqueline Guisset. (2009). *Forces murales, Un art manifeste*. <http://www.museeartwallon.be/spip.php?article52>, 02.05.2009

twenty tints, as well as the exploitation of expressive quality of the thickness of the wool thread and woven fabric texture. By using these procedures re-establishing the connection with the medieval tapestry virtues, Lurçat has the merit of placing the tapestry into an entirely different light, thus opening new perspectives, leading to the unknown development of expression techniques and means.

The premises of French tapestry revival were set when Jean Lurçat - the artist met François Tabard - the master weaver at Aubusson. Lurçat was experimenting for nearly twenty years, and Tabard came from a family with a two-century tradition in weaving.

Lurçat had a true revelation when he saw the work *The Apocalypse*¹⁷, convincing him that he was going on a good track, and the solution for getting out of the crisis the tapestry was in at the time was the collaboration with architects and architecture. The return to sources, the adaptation of a more solid textile, the topics that should be more substantial, the respect for life, the restlessness before the war, death, all these came out of that work and inspired him throughout his entire career.

In 1939 Jean Lurçat, Marcel Gromaire and Pierre Dubreuil left Aubusson to create a series of large tapestries. Before that, however, they learnt the craft from the descendants of the families with a weaving tradition (Tabard, Lauer, Demontet, Goubley, etc.).

Although the war delayed their projects, the artists worked hard these years. The début of other artists, like Dom Robert, Lucien Coutaud, Marc Saint Saens, Jean Picart Le Doux, all trained by Jean Lurçat, took place at the same time.

Inspiring themselves from the Gothic tradition, “when the tapestry knew its golden era”¹⁸, according to Lurçat, most of the artists belonging to this first phase of contemporary tapestry, that of classic technique, designed cartons mainly with a representational nature.

Jean Cassou described the most important of these artists – Jean Lurçat: „(...) he easily finds the expression of great eras, his allegories and symbolism, (...) all this spirit reincarnates a truly original creation, this Lurçat, carrier of a message, being essentially a modern artist, a creator of modern art”¹⁹. His contribution to the art of tapestry was immense. Around a thousand of his cartons were weaved, his works being designed at a large scale.

The rules he drew up based on his experience can be shaped as follows: the tapestry should not be a copy of a painting, but a creation on its own; the tapestry is designed for the wall and must be created according to the destination of the room where it shall be exhibited, it should tend to be monumental; the cartons must be of the actual size of the future tapestry; the texture must be similar to that of the 16th century.

Marcel Gromaire (1892-1971) would follow the same traditional line, his vision being different from that of Lurçat through a geometric graphic, with dominant vertical lines and a strong and transparent colour, suggesting the stained glass. Gromaire is the most austere of the pioneers due to his architectural composition and the sober palette, using a maximum of eighteen shades.

¹⁷ The meeting of the main founder of modern tapestry with this work of art of the Middle Ages would constitute the impact needed to revive an art that declined in the 19th century from its splendour. For Jean Lurçat, the discovery of *The Apocalypse in Angers* meant the return to sources, to the primordial nature of the mural art of the tapestry. His testimony is relevant in this matter: “I must speak about the shock felt in front of the Apocalypse in Angers. I discovered it, like others from my generation, too late and only in 1938, in this hard July of threats and omens... I came back from this visit more convinced than ever of the soundness of the methods thought and then applied by me, and, finally, convinced that only through a close collaboration with architecture and the architect, the painter shall find a solution to his uncertainties of today...”. According to Mariana Tomozei Cocos, *Angers - Spațiu magic al timpului recuperate*. Article. Retrieved January 24, 2009, from <http://www.artevizuale.ro/Tapiserie/Angers-Spatiu-magic-al-timpului-recuperat.html>

¹⁸ Paul Constantin, *op. cit.* p. 150.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 150.

The painters Marc Saint Saëns (1903-1979), author of more than one hundred tapestries, and Jean Picart Le Doux (1902-1982), who also created more than one hundred tapestries, were influenced by Lurçat, although having original features.

Marc Saint Saëns had the imagination and the sensitivity of a Latin. The artist considered not only the sizes of the tapestry, but also the volume and the light of the room where it should be exhibited, thus the tapestry received a well-defined role as part of a decorative design.

Jean Picart Le Doux followed the artistic rules that governed the golden age of tapestry, the patterns reminding of the pastoral scenes or the scenes with animals, so sought in the Middle Ages. He kept his imagination under control, the rhythm and the colours were apparently placed with no effort, obtaining a monumental effect.

4. Conclusions

After this perspective opening created by Lurçat and other several artists, tapestry gained a new status, new fields, such as that of ambient and three-dimensionality. Between these new categories and traditional mural tapestry, there are differences generated by the spatial conception specific to each of them. Thus, mural tapestry, which is designed to be applied on the plane and two-dimensional surface of the wall, is subjected to the laws of mural decoration, having to set the architectural element, to whom it is designed, a spatial continuity to avoid the danger of breaking or fragmenting the wall. The tapestry is subjected by definition to other exigencies than the easel painting to whose virtuosity wrongly aspired in the 18th and 19th centuries. Jean Picard le Doux stated that “easel painting has no precise destination according to architecture, which differentiates it completely from tapestry, monumental art whose purpose is the organisation of an architectural space with which it must fully agree.”²⁰ Mural tapestry, proposed by Lurçat and his partners, must have a monumental nature, which imposes a composition, a colour palette where the dominant colour must be based on a restricted number of shades, avoiding pictorial effects and the exaggerated fragmentation of the surface, the two-dimensional nature having to prevail even when it suggests reliefs and volumes. The role of tapestries is that of decorating the space without breaking the wall, giving the impression of a plane decorative surface, where the perspective effects and the very clear parts must be avoided not to break the harmony and the balance of the whole. This would be a definition of a mural tapestry, because the exit from two-dimensionality at the half of the 20th century was based on other laws, while the introduction of the third dimension means similarity in conception with sculpture or ambient art.

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