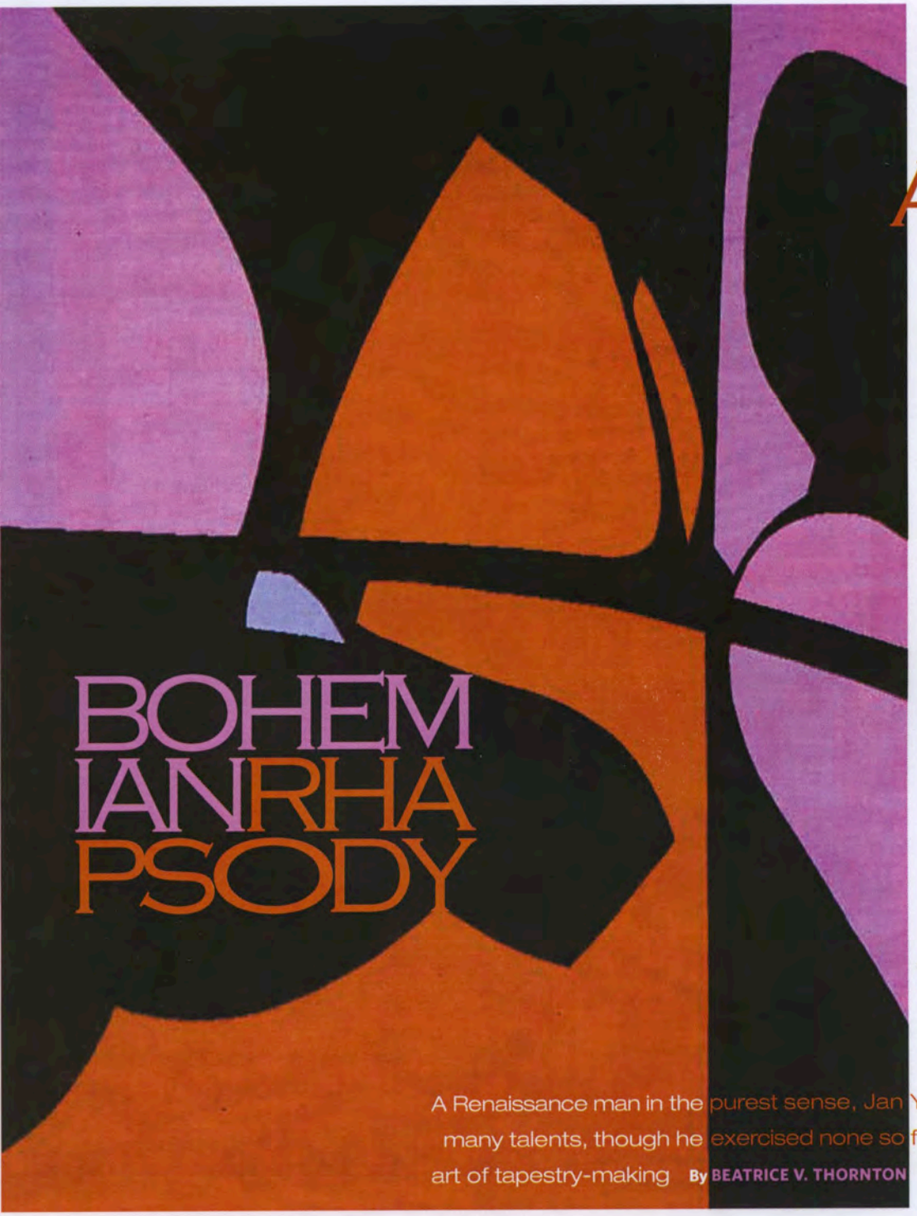
MODERN MAGAZINE

DESIGNDECORATIVE ARTSARCHITECTURE

www.idealmodern.com
SUMMER 2010
$8.00 US
€7 £6 ¥750
BRL 14 DKK 44



BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

A Renaissance man in the purest sense, Jan Yoors was a man of many talents, though he exercised none so fluently as the age-old art of tapestry-making By BEATRICE V. THORNTON

"My dream was to heal the inherent split between art and life, to fuse both...the stable traditional constant and the restlessness, daring and innovative" *–Jan Yoors, 1977, shortly before his death*

At the age of twelve, in 1934, an inquisitive Flemish boy wandered into a caravan of Gypsies—an ethnic group more properly and politely referred to today as the Rom, or the Romany people—who had set up camp outside his native city of Antwerp. Long the object of persecution and scorn, the Rom were clannish and secretive, but they welcomed the child into their midst. By chance that evening the police arrived to roust the Gypsies—an altogether familiar experience for them. As the Rom hastily loaded their wagons and moved out, the twelve-year-old impulsively joined them. He would be gone for six months, but it was only the first of his many travels with the Romany. What's more, the experience would strike the keynotes of his life: a questing curiosity, a sense of adventure, and a preternatural urge to learn and explore as much as he could.

Facing page:
"Tantra," designed by Jan Yoors, 1976. Wool, 6 by 7 feet.

This page:
Annabert Yoors and Marianne Citroen at work in the Yoors studio at 96 Fifth Avenue, New York, 1951–1958.

That boy was Jan Yoors, who is surely one of the most quixotic figures of twentieth-century art and design. In his relatively short life he became a sculptor, a painter, a filmmaker, a writer, an illustrator, and a photographer, as well as a member of the World War II underground. It is one of the ironies of Yoors's career that, had he limited his energies to one medium he would be far better known today than he is. That said, he excelled at any endeavor to which he set his hand. But if any medium can be said to secure the name of Jan Yoors in the pantheon of artist-artisans, it is his work in tapestry. "There is a warmth, depth of hue, and a majesty of composition to his tapestries that is timeless," says Valerie Guariglia,

Marianne and Annabert hemming a "Negev" tapestry in the studio on Waverly Place, New York, 1967–1999.

Yoors's "Negev" of 1974 was commissioned by Seymour H. Knox II for the Marine Midland Bank Headquarters in Buffalo, New York, designed by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.

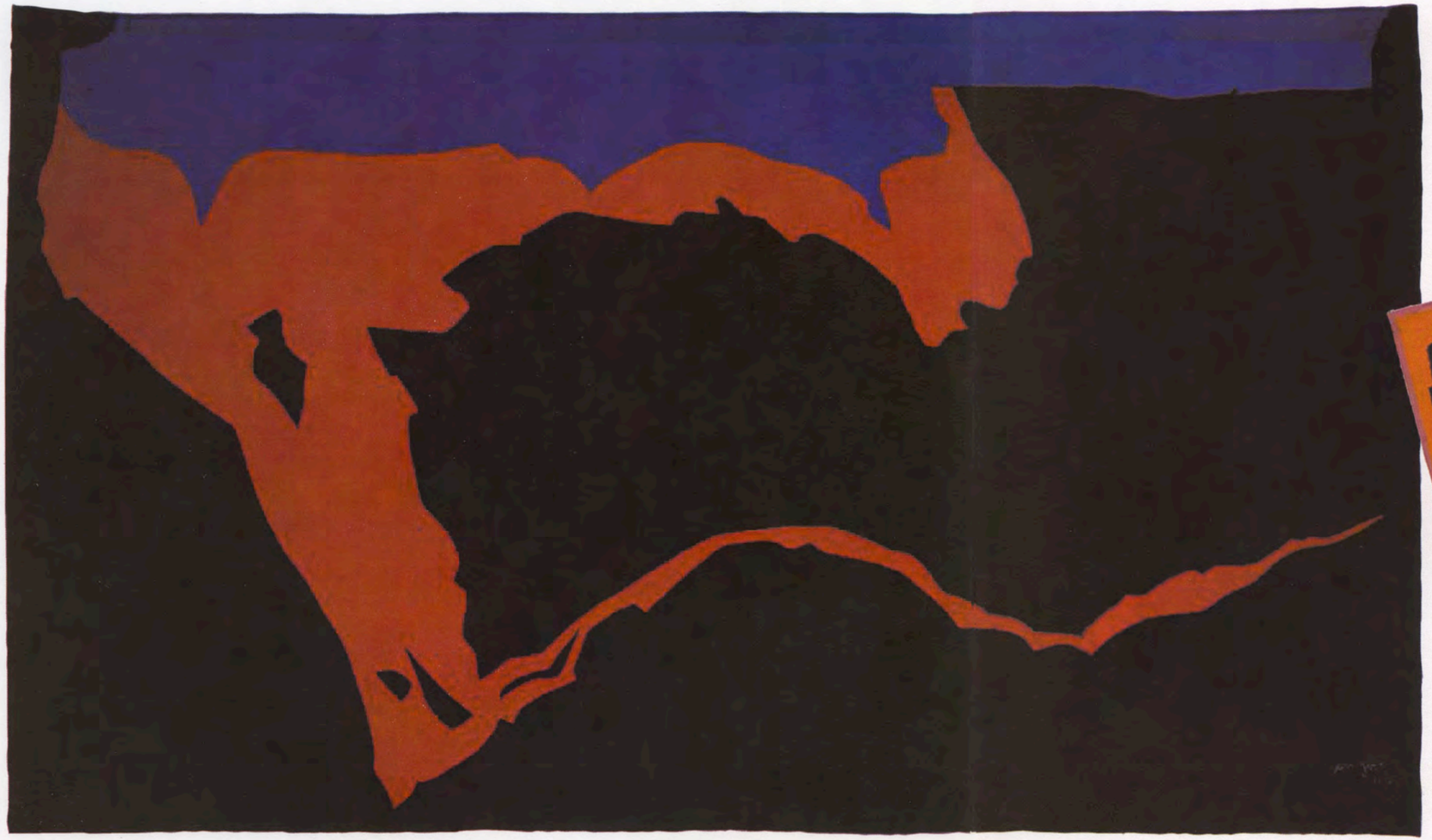
Jan and Annabert cutting a tapestry from a loom.

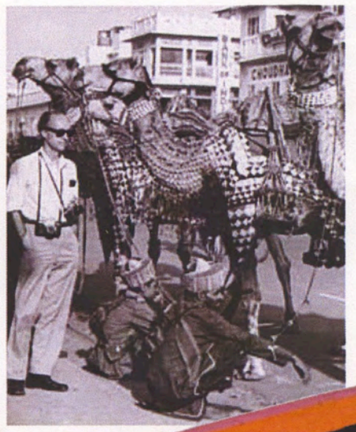
Facing page: **"In the past," 1975. Wool, 7 by 8 feet.**

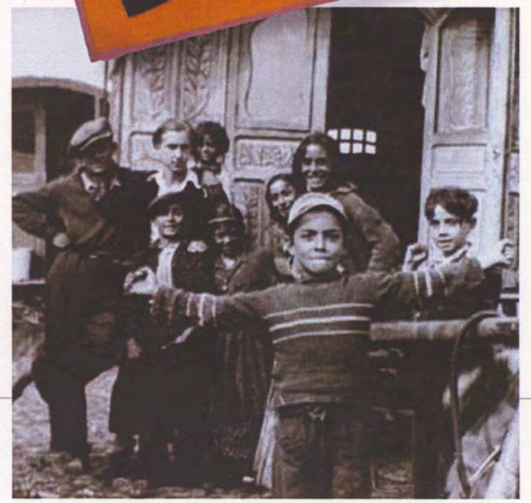
co-principal of the New York design and art gallery reGeneration, which is presenting an exhibition of Yoors photos, drawings, and tapestries though July 17th. "When we discovered the art of Jan Yoors we had never seen the work of an artist who combined the values of mid-century abstraction with the ancient tradition of tapestry in such an elegant way."

But Yoors had miles to go before he would take up work with the loom. After his first foray with the Rom, Yoors returned home. He was fortunate to come from a cultured, liberal-minded family—his father, Eugene,

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE YOORS FAMILY ARCHIVE







"Stormy Sky," 1973. Wool, 8 by 14 feet.

Facing page: **Jan in India for an AIA-commissioned trip to photograph postwar religious architecture from around the world, 1965.**

"Ony Wah," 1964. Wool, 9 by 12 feet.

Jan (second from left in background) with a group of the Rom in a photograph of c. 1938.

was a famed stained-glass artist who had studied under the French symbolist painter Gustave Moreau—and Yoors's parents, unwilling to quench their son's intrepid spirit, agreed to let him spend part of each year with the Rom who had taken him in. This he did until the age of eighteen, while also studying sculpture at art schools in Antwerp and Brussels. Yoors would recount his time with the Rom in his 1967 memoir, *The Gypsies,* a seminal insider's account of an ill-understood people.

During World War II Yoors ran guns for the Resistance and spied for the Allies. At one point he was captured by the Gestapo and tortured but managed to escape. As one story goes, Yoors once helped a group of prisoners flee the Nazis by posing as an SS officer with orders to transport the captives by train. Hitler's forces hunted down the Rom with the same rigor they did Jews. An estimated 250,000 died in concentration camps. Later, Yoors would learn that nearly all the members of his extended Romany family had been murdered at Auschwitz.

After the war Yoors married his childhood sweetheart, Annabert van Wettum. (They had met during a beach vacation when both were eleven. Little Jan had proposed almost immediately, and the pair stayed in touch.) In 1947 the couple moved to suburban London, and Jan enrolled as a student at the Institute of Oriental and African Studies. But the move to England would

"Eruption," 1973. Wool, 8 by 11 feet.

prove to be one of the turning points in Yoors's life, on both personal and artistic levels.

To begin with, Annabert discovered that Marianne Citroen, her fast friend since the first grade, had also moved to the outskirts of London to work as a nanny. The schoolgirl pals reunited with joy, and Marianne soon joined the Yoors household. "This was not planned," Marianne once explained. "It was like the guest who came to dinner" and never left. The second aspect of the change to Yoors's life was equally serendipitous. He had been working on sculptures in between classes, but one day he, his wife, and their friend happened to attend an exhibition of ancient and contemporary French tapestries. The medium—at once vivid in its aesthetics, tactile and textural, and produced in the same communal spirit he had loved in the Rom—astounded him. In short order he, Annabert, and Marianne built their own large-scale loom and learned the techniques of weaving by trial and error.

Artists have long had their work translated into tapestries. Under the ancien régime in France, painters such as Fragonard and François Boucher were commissioned to create works that would be reinterpreted by the weavers at the workshops of Aubusson, Beauvais, or the Gobelins. Many twentieth-century masters such as Jean Lurçat, Picasso, Calder, and Sonia Delaunay had their works re-created as tapestries. Yet none of them took part in the weaving, let alone embraced the process as intimately as Yoors, who was determined to restore tapestry to the ranks of the fine arts.

His earliest works were figurative—most depict biblical or mythological scenes. The characters are outlined in heavy black lines, more than likely inspired by the leading in his father's stained-glass pieces. But over time Yoors's compositions became more and more abstract, and more powerful. The simplified forms in the tapestries burst with vibrant colors and glow with a sense of energy and drama. Ironically, while the

A "Tantra" tapestry in a gallery showroom at 165 Charles Street, New York, designed by Richard Meier

"Sail," 1977. Wool, 7 by 5 feet.

"Yellow Tantra," 1977. Wool, 7 ½ by 8 feet.