



Tapestries by Jan Yoors

Daring in Color and Bold in Design

After years of carefree travel over Europe with the gypsies, somewhat like a teen-age George Borrow, and then years of dangerous behind enemy lines service with British and American intelligence during World War II, Jan Yoors, 30-year old Belgian, now finds himself weaving large tapestries in a high-ceilinged studio on Lower Fifth Avenue. His loom, 18 feet wide and 8 feet high, always threaded with strong linen warps, comes as close to those *haute-lisse* looms, which were set up in medieval Paris, in Tournai and Arras, from which came some of the most splendid tapestries of all time, as any that can be found today.

He built it himself, after he finally had found the heavy wooden beams that were required. In this day of steel construction, such beams have almost disappeared. It was fortunate that 96 Fifth Avenue was built in more spacious days, when grand staircases were in fashion. It took five men to carry one beam up the staircase to the studio. The elevator was no help at all. The loom has no treadles and one set of string heddles stretching clear across the loom. The weavers—himself, his wife and his sister-in-law—operate these entirely by hand. He makes his own bobbins, the conical type illustrated in the first article in this issue.

The Yoors tapestries, first seen here in 1950, made an immediate impression, first perhaps because of their size. Few modern tapestry weavers are working on a monu-



Above: Jan Yoors (right), Mrs. Yoors, her sister, and an apprentice at work on his 18-foot tapestry loom in his New York studio. Below: *The Unicorn* in a contemporary interpretation.

mental scale and few modern tapestries have the clarity of line, the brilliant color contrasts, and figures which, although developed "in the flat," nevertheless have strongly drawn outlines. His surfaces are uncluttered by exces-

sive ornament and the designs are entirely free from the "framed" effect which is characteristic of so much modern tapestry.

He is the son of a well-known Belgian artist in stained glass, so well-known that if Jan had continued to work with him he always would have been known as his father's son. "Every young man, of course, wants to do

ing in art has been in sculpture, which he studied because he wanted to know more of pure form, to detach himself from design and color as exemplified in stained glass. He considers himself a sculptor "by trade." He began to weave in London, after the war. He had had no experience or training in weaving, except what he had picked up as a child working on a small loom that had



Above: "The River Crossing," 15-foot tapestry, designed for dining room in home of Mr. and Mrs. Reuben Rabowitz. Brilliant colors against dark browns, definite gypsy influence. Below: The Knight of Nadara—note gypsy characters on shield.

been around the house. His wife, who is Dutch, had never seen a loom until they decided to begin to make a living with weaving but she was immediately completely fascinated by the craft and has remained so.

"We had to learn absolutely everything by ourselves and that certainly was the hard way," he said. "It had the advantage, however, of being also a sure way." Their friends were very discouraging, especially about weaving anything except small articles so they wove small articles, which didn't sell. Since his whole inclination had been toward weaving large tapestries, with a definite architectural use, he decided he would go ahead, sales or not. The tapestries attracted attention and several commissions followed, including some for churches.

The successful tapestry designer, Yoors holds, must be a highly skilled and experienced weaver, who understands thoroughly the characteristics of yarns and dyes. Yoors uses only wool and linen yarns for his work, following the medieval practise. These yarns must be properly spun for strength. So much work goes into tapestry that there is not much point in weaving it unless the materials are enduring. He dyes all his own yarns, using modern chemical colors. Again like the medieval weavers, he uses only 15 to 20 colors, getting his effects through juxtaposition of contrasting shades and often marking the division of figures with a heavy outline, reminiscent of stained glass technique, although limning in lighter line also is a traditional tapestry technique.

Fast color, fast for 70 or 80 years, is the objective of his researches into dyes and yarns. This statement meets with some amazement but here also the question of time and expense involved in production of a tapestry makes it impracticable to use any except the best possible dyes.

He is not in sympathy with the common European practice in tapestry weaving—the design the work of an artist who knows nothing of weaving and is not concerned with the yarns, the colors or techniques of tapestry. Reproduction of an artist's painting—often not an especially made cartoon for tapestry—by a weaver who is regarded almost as a mechanism—does not produce tapestries

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something on his own," he said. He wanted a career of some kind in art but the restrictions and formality of stained glass did not attract him. His only formal train-

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which are vital, effective wall decorations.

He uses linen for warps because of its strength. He weaves his design vertically, on the right side; for this reason strength of warp is required. Wool for wefts not only gives strength, but warmth to the design itself, an important factor in coverings for stone and concrete walls. Wool also produces an agreeable attractive texture, another important element in tapestry.

Since arriving in the United States he has had several exhibitions, the most recent last fall at the Hugo Galleries, New York, and has woven several large tapestries which are now in private homes. In one instance the house was in fact rebuilt around a 5' x 15' tapestry, "The River Crossing," illustrated here. This was commissioned by Mr. and Mrs. Reuben Rabinowitz for their home at Clifton, New Jersey. Mr. Rabinowitz is president of the Atlantic Chemical Corporation, makers of fine dyes. Ever since he commissioned the tapestry Mr. Rabinowitz has been working with Yoons on problems of dyeing with special relation to tapestry yarns.

The designs from his tapestries always grow out of the wall on which they are to be hung. When he sees the wall space and the surroundings, meets the clients who will commission the work, the design begins to evolve. He finds that his clients like his designs. Very few suggestions come from them.

When he is designing "on his own" he is apt to improvise a great deal, without preparing a cartoon, because he can see his design so clearly in his mind. His working cartoons for his assistants—his wife, sister-in-law, and an occasional apprentice—are often simple outlines with little detail. "We are so thoroughly familiar with each other's ideas that a detailed cartoon isn't necessary," he said.

To show his clients, however, he makes a cartoon of actual size in color. The color, however, is not true because he matches the cartoons to the wools instead of the wool to the cartoon. But the large color cartoons, shown with the wools which will be used, give the client a good idea of how the finished piece will look.

"When we have finished a tapestry, we destroy the cartoon. We couldn't possibly duplicate a design if we wanted to—so much has been developed as we went along."

One of the reasons he was attracted to tapestry weaving is that it can be a group effort. The long periods of being entirely alone in his secret service assignments, and solitary confinement in several prisons during the war, created a desire for companionship in work, rather than the solitary life many artists lead. "The soldier always has the army to fall back upon eventually," Yoons said, "but the secret service agent is always on his own."

Conditions in the United States are exactly right for a revived interest in tapestry at present, he believes. He sees here a country which has great comfort but little luxury, and Europe a land of great luxury but little comfort. Now Americans have more time to consider luxury in their surroundings and are finding it a pleasant experience to work with artist-craftsmen in planning not only tapestries but other fine furnishings for their home and office buildings.

Modern architecture in the United States also can

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employ tapestry effectively. Many large public or semi-public buildings are now being constructed with large bare wall areas, unbroken by windows because of air conditioning. Here tapestries can lend color and warmth, and break up otherwise monotonous surroundings.

The colors and subjects of the Yoons tapestries are greatly influenced by his life among the gypsies, which began at the age of twelve. In fact, it was the color of a gypsy camp, in contrast to the gray dreariness of Antwerp, which first attracted him. He took off his shoes when he began to play with the children and when he was ready to leave the shoes had disappeared. Not wanting to walk barefooted through the streets in daylight, he stayed until evening. Then dancing began around a campfire, and when it was over he just went on with the gypsies. He returned after six months and was received calmly at home, although his parents hadn't known where he was. From then until he was 18 he traveled with the gypsies from six to eight months of the year.

The British secret service probably heard of him because of the story that he was the son of a French millionaire, or an Austrian prince, stolen by the gypsies, which started among the farmers in Austria. The gypsies, especially the chief who had adopted him, were amused and didn't deny it, although he says gypsies do not steal children. In intelligence work in Germany he had the cooperation of gypsies, because they had been victims of Hitler's racial policies. After imprisonment in Germany, and an escape after he had been condemned to death, he fled to Spain in 1943, when he learned a price had been put on his head. He later returned to Germany and with the aid of Spanish gypsies, planned escape routes through Spain for R.A.F. fliers and intelligence men. He spent some time in one of Franco's concentration camps but was released through the intervention of Anthony Eden.

After the war he studied for a time at London University, doing research into gypsy life and history. He speaks the language, which is a Sanskrit dialect. He is now at work on a book, autobiographical, with plenty of gypsy lore. He is friendly with gypsies in the United States—his "cousins" had a big party for him when he arrived. They are much distressed, however, because he married a *gajo*—a non-gypsy.

He has found a market in New York for his drawings as well as his tapestries. His use of the strongly drawn line in his tapestry designs is a healthy influence for modern tapestry weaving, reminiscent of the stained glass design and the strength often shown in sculptor's drawings. With his varied background and determined approach to his work, one feels that his interest may extend in many new directions in the field of architectural embellishment.