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FROM TOP:
Liberté, a 1960
tapestry by
Jean Lurçat.
The artist in
1957. Bestiaire
Corail, 1950.



RADICAL SHEET

JEAN LURÇAT, THE ARTIST WHO SINGLE-HANDEDLY SAVED THE GLORIOUS TRADITION OF FRENCH TAPESTRY FROM OBLIVION, IS FINALLY GETTING HIS DUE.

BY CATHERINE HONG

In the 1940s and '50s, when the great French weavers Gobelins and Aubusson were reduced to producing tired imitations of lady-in-a-swing paintings—using as many as 14,000 different colors, and all at outrageous cost—Jean Lurçat, the father of modern tapestry, tried something simple but different: He infused his tapestries with life. “The art had died,” he said, “killed by consumption, insipidness, lymphatism, and inversion.”

By contrast, Lurçat’s designs are alive

with flora, fauna (both real and imaginary), the sun and stars, colors often in stark contrast with one another—and optimism. He depicted the Earth and the cosmos in their mysterious, powerful glory. “For lovers of modern tapestry, there is no one who compares,” says Lizzie Deshayes, the creative director of London-based wallpaper company Fromental. “Lurçat rescued tapestry from a long period of decline and made it compelling again. His work was absolutely extraordinary.”

Born in Bruyères, France, in 1892, Lurçat began his career as a painter, working in a style inspired by Fauvism and Cubism. But he was always intrigued by textiles. He made his first move toward tapestry weaving when he was 20, persuading his mother to embroider a 12-by-20-inch watercolor he had painted. Over the next two decades, he found increasing success as a painter but continued to draw cartoons (the full-scale ▷

designs made in preparation for tapestry) and experiment with weaving.

It was in 1937 in Angers, France, when Lurçat had his epiphany. Traveling with friends, he saw the famous 14th-century *Apocalypse* tapestries depicting scenes from the Book of Revelation. "I can hardly describe the shock that I felt," he said. "What delighted us most was precisely the extraordinarily lyrical power of this work and [its] economy of means.... Only 17 shades were used for this enormous hanging of 720 square meters."

Lurçat's revelation was that great tapestry could be achieved by simplification. He began by reducing the number of colors in his designs to a maximum of 34 shades. Then he assigned each color a number that he marked directly on his cartoons, which eliminated the time-consuming process of matching shades in the workshop. Finally, he advocated using a coarser weave, which further reduced the labor and cost. This "economy of means," he argued, enhanced

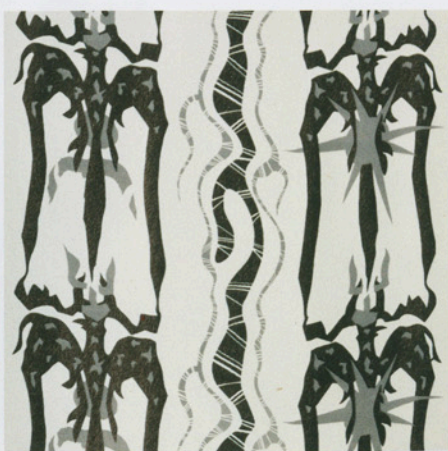


Nick Olsen (inset) designed a room at the 2017 Kips Bay Decorator Show House around Lurçat's *Sonate et Claire de Lune*.

rather than detracted from the final product. As he put it: "Did Johann Sebastian Bach ever insist upon a piano with 25 octaves?"

Over his lifetime, Lurçat designed nearly 1,000 works, most of which (ironically) were woven at the workshops of Aubusson. His most famous is *Le Chant du Monde* (1957–66), an epic suite of 10 tapestries that tells the story of human destiny from the nuclear attack on Hiroshima to the conquest of space—his own *Apocalypse* made modern. It can be viewed at Lurçat's namesake museum within Les Musées d'Angers in France.

Considering Lurçat's importance as an artist, his work has long been overlooked. Prices for his tapestries have held steady over the past decade,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Pierre Frey, grandson of the founder of the French fabric house, and three of its designs inspired by Lurçat: *Soleil Noir* and *Sirènes* fabrics, and *Champagne* wallpaper in *Rose*.



WHERE TO FIND IT

Sources for tapestries by Jean Lurçat:

- FJ Hakimian, New York, fjahakimian.com
- Galerie Deroyan, Paris, deroyan.fr
- Vojtech Blau, New York, vojtechblau.com

Sources for Lurçat-inspired textiles:

- Fromental, London, fromental.co.uk
- Pierre Frey, Paris, www.pierrefrey.com

generally ranging from a few thousand to \$50,000, depending on size. But recently, the artist's star has begun to rise. At the 2017 Kips Bay Decorator Show House, designer Nick Olsen anchored an eclectic modernist sitting room with *Sonate et Claire de Lune*, a dreamy Lurçat tapestry from the 1940s inspired by the Debussy piece. Earlier this year, Pierre Frey released *Sirènes*, a bold pattern of azure, white, and red. "I'm using the fabric as a bedcovering, and I'm painting the floor in the same design to match," says Olsen.

Meanwhile, one of Deshayes's latest creations for Fromental is a hand-painted silk wallcovering modeled on a Lurçat design. Named *Bruyère*, after his birthplace, it features exotic vegetation and a sun radiating undulating beams of light. "Lurçat adored the symbol of the sun," says Dirk Holger, a German-born tapestry weaver who was one of Lurçat's last assistants before his death at the age of 73 in 1966. "He loved beauty, and he believed that tapestry was supposed to lift the spirits. For him, tapestry was a celebration of life and humanity." ■