

# Small and Creative Hands

By Kevin Bonnaud

*hiEurope went to visit the capital of luxury tapestries, where the 500-year-old expertise in weaving tapestries became a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009.*



Kevin Bonnaud is hiEurope's France correspondent. He reports on new and unknown places for you to discover.

The tiny town of Aubusson, set on the River Creuse, has long been a center for weaving. Local sheep supplied the wool, silk was carried by pack horse from the silkworms that were bred in the sunnier Rhone Valley, and vegetable dyes came from the fields and forests. The green and remoted valley inspired many European artists, one of them was George Sand. This French novelist discovered close to Aubusson a master series of six Flemish tapestries of a lady with a unicorn, which are now among the most famous in the world. The six tapestries had come to the region sometime after 1500 when the rich merchant from Lyon who commissioned them had died. Inspiration seems to have struck, because the master weavers of the village imitated and modified the animals-and-plants background, known as *verdures*, creating a rich style of their own. This is how tiny Aubusson became a famous place.

## Patience with the Loom

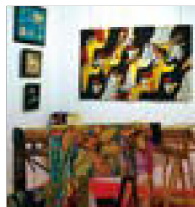
Our journey begins on top of a 16th century turret redesigned into an old upholsterer house called *Maison du Tapisier*. The actual workshop, originally on the top floor to get maximum light, has been reconstructed lower down. Here you can see the tools that are used in all the stages - starting from taking the wool from a sheep's back until weaving a work of art that was extremely valuable even when it was new. The weaving workshop-museum is full of shelves with wool but it's the imposing low-warped loom that captures our attention.

"Weavers are only patient when they are behind their loom. Don't ask me to be patient in my everyday life," weaver Oceane Masson laughs as she puts warp yarns between two beams. It took her two years to complete her last 6m<sup>2</sup> tapestry, she says. Weaving might seem a repetitive business, but here we learn that it isn't. There are many techniques: multi-threading for an emboss effect; hatching for blending colors and weaving flecked fabric for a fading effect. "It's like making drawings or paintings," Masson explains.

A former law student, Masson learned her craft at the Cité de la Tapisserie during a two-year retraining program. The Cité is at once a museum, an institution for the transmission of know-how, a research center, a start-up space for related businesses and a platform for the promotion and creation of contemporary tapestries. Recently, the center also started to restore old and damaged tapestries.



Verdure Fine aux Armes de Brühl (1750) was made for Louis XIV.



The museum's Nef des Tentures is fascinating.



Making a Lord of the Rings tapestry.

## Gallery of Tapestries

In the Cité's museum we visit the fascinating Nef des Tentures, where we admire locally made wall-hangings of five by seven meters. Visitors are introduced to Aubusson's oldest tapestry known as *Millefleurs à la Licorne* (1480), a series of greeneries with cabbage leaf motives and fantasy animals, hunting in mythologic scenes.

As we go deeper into the gallery, the tapestries become thinner and start to look like paintings. There's the exotic greenery « Verdure Fine aux Armes de Brühl » (1750) with its blue trim, symbol of Aubusson's royal manufacture for Louis XIV. You see woven portraits with expressive looks, which require delicate work and take 1 m<sup>2</sup> per year to make. Even more surprising are a number of contemporary tapestries from 20th century artists like Picasso.

The making of modern creations continues with yearly calls for proposals and one very ambitious project: the weaving of 13 tapestries inspired by drawings made by British author J.R.R. Tolkien to illustrate his literary works from *Lord of the Rings* to *The Hobbit*. The first tapestry, Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft Elves was unveiled in 2018. It follows in the footsteps of the great narrative wall-hangings of the 17th and 18th centuries, which were series of tapestries illustrating different parts of a story. Often literary texts like Homer's *Odyssey* were depicted.

## Masterpiece Drawings

With copies of Tolkien's watercolor paintings, visitors can also see how artists convert small original works into painted plaster-board models of the size of the tapestry to guide weavers. "Enlarged illustrations are reworked bit by bit to make sure a tiny rose doesn't look like a

cabbage," says Bruno Ythier, curator of the museum.

Chantal Chirac, a restorer from Paris, started to preserve these art pieces (which they call cartoons) when she moved to Aubusson 30 years ago. "I felt badly about these drawings that were passed to weavers as soon as they were completed, set under looms, tortured with pins and then thrown away," she says, amused. Her restoration workshop, located in a gorgeous half-timbered riverside house, is an Aladdin's cave with hidden treasures including grids from the 18th century, drawings with written comments or numbers matching a color code.

In the beginning, we learn, the drawings were not coloured entirely, leaving the weavers room for interpretation. This all changed in 1515 when a famous drawing was made by master artist Raphael for Pope Leon X. The work was so accomplished, that the Pontiff asked for an exact copy to be woven as a tapestry. After that, tapestry models became reproductions of paintings until the emergence of a creative movement in the 20th century, when it all changed again.

Nowadays, there are all kinds of tapestries, traditional or modern, and you can buy them in the shops in the village. They are not cheap - prices for a hand-worked tapestry start at about 2,000 Euros for a small wall hanging. But, considering that they take at least three months to make, and come from a historical village that once produced for the rich and famous, this is a small price to pay.

[www.cite-tapisserie.fr/en](http://www.cite-tapisserie.fr/en)