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Another Look at the Loom: Tapestry Art Makes Comeback in Paris

By MARA HOBERMAN

PARIS — Woolly knits and hand-knotted weavings have a new home this fall: the Paris art scene. Art dealers and curators are exhibiting an array of textile creations — from wall hangings to woven sculptures — in museums, contemporary galleries and art fair booths.

Last month, the Musée d'Art Moderne opened its largest ever textile show, featuring more than 100 woven creations, including rugs by the artists Pablo Picasso and Fernand Léger as well as works by contemporary artists, like Caroline Achaintre's hand-tufted multicolored "Moustache-Eagle." The Pompidou Center, meanwhile, is showcasing a 63-foot-long, or 19-meter-long, Merino wool weaving by the French artist duo Dewar and Gicquel until Jan. 6. At the international art fair FIAC last month, tapestries by contemporary artists like William Kentridge and Francesco Vezzoli were for sale at the Grand Palais.

The show at the Musée d'Art Moderne, "Decorum: Carpets and Tapestries by artists," which runs until Feb. 9, celebrates a "Neo-Craft" movement in which established and emerging artists are reclaiming fine-art status for materials and practices typically classified as craft or decorative arts. The "Decorum" curator Anne Dressen noticed the tapestry trend about five years ago, "first in isolated instances, then more and more in artists studios, and finally in exhibitions," she said. Ms. Dressen added that she was interested in showing, "artists who are embracing the craft tradition themselves as well as those who relegate fabrication to artisans."

Rug-themed exhibitions have recently been popping up in art centers around the world. Last spring, the Gagosian Gallery in London showcased Gerhard Richter's tapestries, and Rudolf Stingel's installation of Ottoman-style carpets took over the Palazzo Grassi during the Venice Biennale this year. In September, the first-ever Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Arts got under way in China, while Italy and Germany were hosts to two group shows titled "Soft Pictures" (on view at Turin's Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo until March 23) and "Textiles: Open Letter," which was recently on view at the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach. A traveling exhibition, "The New Art of the Loom: Contemporary International Tapestry," featuring artists from 16 countries will make its way across Canada and the United States over the next two years.

Many artists are attracted to the craft techniques as well as the physical qualities of fabrics and yarns. Daniel Dewar of the artistic pair Dewar and Gicquel said working with wool, “was a means of exploring soft and furry imagery.” Their monumental Boucherite-style tapestry at the Pompidou depicts a Welsh corgi and a bathrobe, among other items. The art dealer Guillaume Sultana, whose gallery in the Marais district was swathed in a massive hand-dyed wall hanging by the Mexican artist Pia Camil this fall, suggested that revisiting so-called applied arts’ materials and processes “actually offers artists much more freedom than a painting or a sculpture.” He added, however, that these works could be “less easy to sell because they are so voluminous.”

But if the offerings at FIAC were any indication, there appears to be a healthy market for contemporary artists’ carpets and tapestries, perhaps aided by the fact that textile works are often priced lower than paintings and sculptures. A giant Michael Beutler carpet selling at the Frankfurt-based Galerie Bärbel Grässlin’s FIAC booth was priced by length. At 1,200 euros, or about \$1,600, per meter, the gallery director Klaus Weibelholz described the carpet’s €14,400 price tag as “relatively cheap.” The carpet sold to a collector in Israel. Another German gallery, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler of Berlin, did brisk business selling several limited-edition wool and yarn tapestries by the artist collective Slavs and Tatars (prices started at €7,000.)

Local galleries have also recently been showing off woven works. This September in the gallery-filled Marais district of Paris, Galerie Alain Gutharc presented the French artist Yann Gerstberger’s hand-dyed cotton tapestries, and the Almine Rech Gallery featured the Mexican artist Eduardo Terrazas’s colorful geometric abstractions made using the traditional Huichol technique of covering waxed boards with colorful yarn. In the up-and-coming gallery enclave in the Belleville neighborhood of Paris, the walls of the Galerie Balice Hertling were recently adorned with the American artist Sam Falls’s sun-bleached blankets.

In Paris, the interest in tapestries is also a revival of sorts. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, tapestries were considered a superior art form to painting, and French royal palaces were draped with enormous pictorial weavings designed by masters like Le Brun and Boucher. Paris’s Manufacture des Gobelins, which has produced tapestries since the 17th century, carried out commissions for dignitaries like Louis XIV and Napoleon. The Left Bank workshop has 15 looms, which are used to produce official tapestries for the French government’s local offices and embassies.

Chevalier Édition illustrates another overlap between traditional Parisian carpet-making and contemporary art, fabricating limited-edition rugs. Camille Chevalier, who opened the business in 2008, hails from a long line of French rug doyens. In 1917 her great grandfather founded Chevalier

Conservation, which still specializes in high-end carpet cleaning, restoration, and conservation. In addition to furnishing private residences, Chevalier Édition has recently lent and sold rugs to museums.

Some tapestry fans visiting Paris this fall, however, may find themselves out of luck: The city's most famous tapestries — the Musée de Cluny's 15th-century "The Lady and the Unicorn" series — have been on loan in Japan, where they were exhibited at the National Art Center in Tokyo and the National Museum of Art in Osaka. Now that those exhibitions have ended, the star attraction will return home to a renovated gallery in the Cluny museum at the end of the year.



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