

TIED IN THE WOOL



This page: Walter Smith. Opposite: top right, Walter Smith; others, courtesy Annabert and Marianne Yoors

By Cathryn Drake

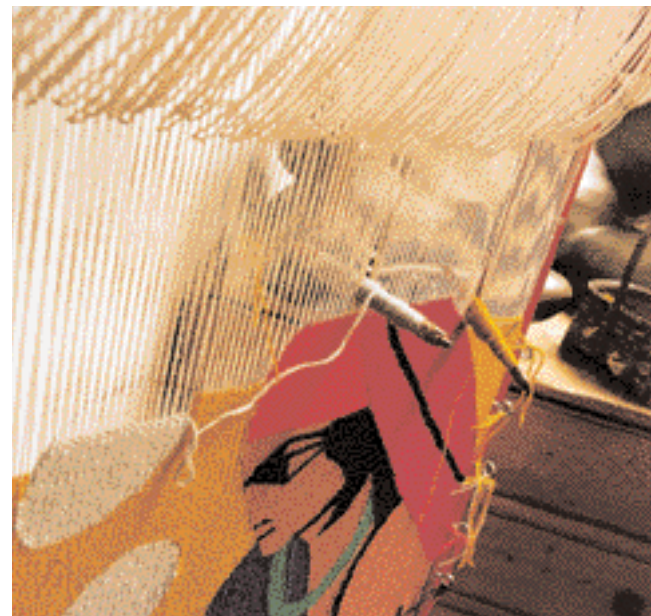
Annabert and Marianne Yoors have been weaving extraordinary tapestries together for half a century. The secret to their longevity as a team lies in the complex warp and weft of their unconventional relationship: they have the manner of sisters, or a life-long couple, although they are neither. Their work is based on the designs of the man they both married: Jan Yoors, the Belgian artist who turned the age-old craft of tapestry making into a twentieth-century fine art. After his death at age 55 in 1977, the two women undertook to complete his legacy: twenty-odd tapestry designs that had yet to be woven.

Twenty-four years later, the Yoorses continue the work in their studio home in New York's West Village. On the walls are pieces by Jan's father, Eugene, an important midcentury stained-glass artist, as well as paintings and drawings by Jan and his son Kore. Jan's larger-than-life bronze nudes sit and recline under the skylights in the main studio/living room. Yaku, their old sheepdog, saunters in, his paws slipping every which way on the dark wood floor. An enormous abstract-design tapestry hangs above the sofa, which is covered in an oriental rug, and a giant loom takes up the entire wall at one end of the room.

Now in their seventies, the Yoors women have a youthful energy and capricious humor about them. The regal yet impish Marianne holds court, wearing an elegant monochrome ensemble with a simple long skirt. Annabert, delicate and poised, is dressed in a long floral-print skirt with a braid down her back—just as she and Marianne appear in 30-year-old photographs of them working at the loom. She is in the process of weaving *Gathering the Manna*, which depicts a woman picking up the food that God sent down to Moses and the Jews in the desert as they make their exodus from Egypt. Next she and Marianne will embark on a 14-foot-wide abstract tapestry: a light brown dragonlike shape with two blue “eye” accents on a black background.

The weaving itself looks repetitive and tedious: alternating vertical cotton warp threads are switched from front to back and then divided by a shuttle; the weft of wool yarn is then threaded through and packed down into place with the tip of a screwdriver. This is repeated rapidly, creating a rhythmic, gentle thudding sound. One large tapestry can take three to four months to finish. However, Annabert says, “We have music and we have talking, and it is not boring. It's very exciting to see it going up; to do it really as the drawing is you have to be very careful.” Although the patterns are very simple, they are not easy to form in wool. Marianne explains: “If you go and stand in front of the Unicorn Tapestries, you don't know where there is a mistake, because it is so busy

Thanks to the women behind the loom, the exuberant designs of tapestry artist Jan Yoors outlive their creator.



Annabert and Marianne Yoors (opposite: left and right, respectively) continue to weave the twenty-odd tapestries left unrealized after the death of their husband, Jan (left, in 1962). They're currently working on *Gathering of the Manna* (above). Jan's bold, simple designs—such as *Tantra on Pink and Orange* (1976; above left)—earned recognition for tapestry as an art form in the United States.

with leaves and flowers. Jan has a tapestry that's just a black line on orange. Now if after three months of weaving you unroll it and you have made a mistake, you cannot take it out, you cannot correct it. Simplicity in life is much more difficult, more complicated.”

More complicated still are the ties that bind. Annabert and Marianne are childhood friends who grew up on the same street in the Netherlands and later fell for the same man. In a union that inspired much speculation (not to mention male envy) the three lived together for 30 years, revolutionizing tapestry design and raising a family; with Jan, Annabert had two children, Vanya



“Stand in front of the Unicorn Tapestries: you don’t know where there is a mistake, because it is so busy with leaves and flowers,” Marianne says. “Simplicity in life is much more difficult.”



The scale and simplicity of Jan’s tapestries complement the expansive walls and spaces in Modern buildings. *Negev I* (1971–72; top) was commissioned by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill for the Marine Midland Bank in Buffalo. The Yoorses at work with two assistants in their Greenwich Village studio on Waverly Place (1973; left).

and Lyuba, and Marianne had one, Kore. (Jan married Annabert and later divorced her and married Marianne—a formality to legalize his paternity of the children.) “After Jan’s death, Annabert’s the one who has been very forceful in weaving,” Marianne says. “I became involved with the babies and cooking, and all that.” Together they maintained a lively, welcoming household. “Because Jan died so early, the kids were small, so we really pulled it all together,” Annabert says. “And that will go on. Marianne

and I will stay together as much as possible.”

The work, of course, is the other thing that will go on. “Jan was very anxious that it would continue,” Annabert says. “Because he did [the designs] on paper with colors, I had everything that I needed.” In fact, she says, the process of making the tapestries has not changed at all from when Jan was alive. The two women have fulfilled four or five commissions since his death, and Cleveland State University Art Gallery is currently showing a major exhibition of their work (May 11–June 9), comprised of 12 large abstract tapestries—three of which were executed after 1977. “Jan made some very beautiful art,” Annabert says. “I want it to come into the world.”

Fleeing Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War, Jan, Annabert, and Marianne set up one of the first independent tapestry studios in the United States, in New York in 1951. According to curator and critic Carol K. Russell, European tapestry weaving had previously been done under a master-apprentice system that removed the weaver from any emotional involvement with the design. Tapestries were traditionally woven from the back, but the Yoorses wove from the front on an upright loom, a variation on the traditional Gobelins technique that allowed direct involvement and improvisation.

At the time tapestries were made mostly for interior decorating and were produced in multiples. Designs were based on miniature maquettes by artists unfamiliar with the medium; painters such as Picasso, Calder, and Motherwell licensed their works to be reproduced. Gloria Ross, the tapestry entrepreneur of the day, would take such designs to France or Scotland to have them blown up and woven on a grand scale. But Jan rendered full-scale cartoons of his designs, weaving only one of each. Also a sculptor and painter, he approached the discipline as a fine art. “Tapestry should be understood as an art in its own right,” he wrote, “rather than a mere translation of a painter’s concept enlarged to a scale different from the one originally intended by the artist.”

In fact Jan revolutionized the medium by bringing artist and weaver together as one. As a weaver, he understood the dynamics of its process and materials. In a 1974 film about him, *A Fleming in New York*, art critic Robert Hughes said that what impressed him most about Jan’s works was their undeniable conception as

This page: bottom, George Oserna; others, courtesy Annabert and Marianne Yoors. Opposite: right/middle, Walter Smith; others, courtesy Annabert and Marianne Yoors



“The women of Jan’s life made possible this unique circumstance. They worked and lived these pieces of art, so the works have an immediacy,” says Penelope Hunter-Stiebel.

expressions of the medium. “He is an absolute master of weaving; he designs in terms of the weave and the knot,” Hughes said. “And this gives his work—despite its simplicity and its extreme straightness and boldness of design—a really sumptuous quality that you don’t get very much in twentieth-century tapestry.”

Jan’s designs are remarkable for their exuberant colors, bold lines and forms, and intimate, expressionistic perspective. His early subjects included biblical scenes and stylized female nudes; in the 1960s and ’70s the works became increasingly abstract, which made them ideal for the lobbies of Modernist corporate buildings, including Gordon Bunshaft’s Marine Midland Bank Headquarters, in Buffalo, New York, and Marcel Breuer’s Hubert H. Humphrey Building, in Washington, D.C.

Jan Yoors’s life story is epic. Living out a childhood fantasy, at age 12 he ran away with a *kumpania* (band) of Gypsies. When he returned home to Antwerp six months later, his liberal parents gave him permission to travel with the Romany for several months each year, which he did until he was 18. During World War II, Jan and the Gypsies carried arms to the Resistance; he later helped prisoners escape the Nazis by impersonating a high-ranking SS officer with permission to transport them via train. Captured twice—suffering solitary confinement, torture, and a death sentence—Jan ended the war in Franco’s notorious Miranda concentration camp in Spain, from which he was released in 1945. Meanwhile, nearly every member of his adopted Romany family was killed in Auschwitz. He later wrote the acclaimed book **continued on page 154**



Jan also worked in other media, including charcoal (untitled drawings, 1974–77; top). The biblical-themed tapestries *Joshua Holding Back the Night* (1948; left middle) and *At the Walls of Jericho* (1948; above) were finished before Jan’s death; Annabert and Marianne completed *Moses and the Burning Bush* (1984–85; middle right) alone. Hemming *Negev* (1975; right) after removing it from the loom.



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The Gypsies (1967), a lyrical account of his life with the Romany, and *Crossing* (1971), about his experiences during the war.

Jan had met Annabert on a beach vacation at the age of eleven. Staying in touch, they met up again after the war and moved to England together. They set up housekeeping on the outskirts of London and soon after that, as their son Vanya says, "Marianne came to stay with them as friends, and it just kind of went from there." (Marianne is more frank. "This was not planned," she says, referring to her role in the relationship. "It's like the guest who came for dinner.")

Jan had been trained as a sculptor in Brussels and started practicing again in England. Annabert and Jan were also weaving shawls and other small items for extra money—and then the two saw an exhibition of ancient and contemporary tapestries from France. "When Jan saw that you could design large-scale and have a large loom, he got fascinated by that," Marianne says. He had found a sympathetic medium that also suited his love for collaboration. The three of them built their first loom together and figured out the techniques of weaving by trial and error.

In moving to New York, they sought a place to forget the pain and disorder of postwar Europe; but the work also created stability and purpose. "Don't forget we came out of the war," Marianne explains, "*los geslagen*—what is the word in English? After a storm the woods are ripped out, the trees are flying, everything is gone, and you have no more roots. Everything is chaos. And after that chaos you have to try to find a meaning in life again. The war was behind us, and it was a new focus." Along the way, the trio raised the family, living and weaving together on the giant looms. Everything centered on the enormous, light-filled studio, where they sometimes worked ten hours a day. "The house and the studio were one," says 32-year-old Kore, who is a painter. "They'd stay awake late at night and work. It was a very unified life. I think without the tapestries the relationship wouldn't have lasted."

Sharing the household was a natural outgrowth of working together, and that came through in the quality of the work. "Jan Yoors was living the tapestry," says Penelope Hunter-Stiebel, former curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "It was created in his home. From the act of creation it was all one with him—and that was absolutely extraordinary in the world of tapestry." Although Annabert and Marianne would weave many hours a week, there were never set hours. In between, they would have lunch in the garden, do the shopping, and take the children to the botanical gardens, a museum, or the zoo. The weaving was completely integrated into their home life. As Hunter-Stiebel puts it, "The women of Jan's life made possible this unique circumstance in which the creation of the image and textile could be concentrated in the same environment. They worked and lived these pieces of art, so the works themselves have an immediacy."

To the outside world the household may have seemed bohemian and unconventional, but according to those who knew the Yoorses well, they led a conservative lifestyle—perhaps not unlike that of a patriarchal Gypsy *kumpania*. Stephane Dujarric, a friend of Vanya's since grade school, says, "I remember having more freedom than he did at that age. Jan was a tough guy. When somebody describes to you the family situation, you don't think of him as conservative, but he was. That is what I think is very interesting about his character." Kore notes, "My father adopted a lot of the Gypsy worldview. We were raised like Gypsies but without a community."

Jan's friend Michael Korda, who is Simon & Schuster's editor in chief, remembers Jan introducing him to Andy Warhol and taking him to the Factory and Max's Kansas City. But he adds that Jan also had a "short-haired, laid-back conservative" side along with "an unbelievable ability to put on a dark suit and a white shirt and tie, go to big corporations, and

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“Even today the Yoorses are held up as the standard by which all other tapestry makers are judged. Their technique is superb.”

come away with commissions for huge tapestries to put in their lobbies.”

Just as Jan’s home life was suffused by the work, the work clearly was infused with his experiences. “Jan was very particular about color,” says Russell, who is working on Jan’s biography. “It goes back to the Gypsies, but it also goes back to his father’s stained-glass windows.” Just as Romany men tie swatches of brightly colored fabric around their necks, Jan might be inspired by a piece of cloth, which he would take to his yarn dyer to have the color reproduced in Persian wool. His repertoire was limited to about 15 to 20 colors, often outlined with thick black lines—not unlike those in stained-glass windows.

Jan’s compositions also conveyed the movement and immediacy of Gypsy life with dynamic forms, the absence of a frame, and close cropping that often left out parts of the subject. (“It is what is unseen in a person, or a drawing, that makes them interesting,” he said.) In his monumental abstract tapestries, the images explode off the edges of the “canvas,” pulling the viewer into the center and filling their entire field of vision. In *The Gypsies* Jan writes, “I want to evoke a mood: the overwhelming immensity of the sky and the timelessness of the moment, where night is merely the continuation of the day.”

Drawing on his training as a sculptor, Jan used pure forms and flat visual terms. Unlike traditional tapestry, which employs a painterly effect, his colors are not mingled, blended, or shaded. “Instead of using color as a color, he’s using it as a block,” says Nobuko Kajitani, textile conservator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “He is the only person who can use two contrasting colors to make an area three-dimensional. That’s his magic.”

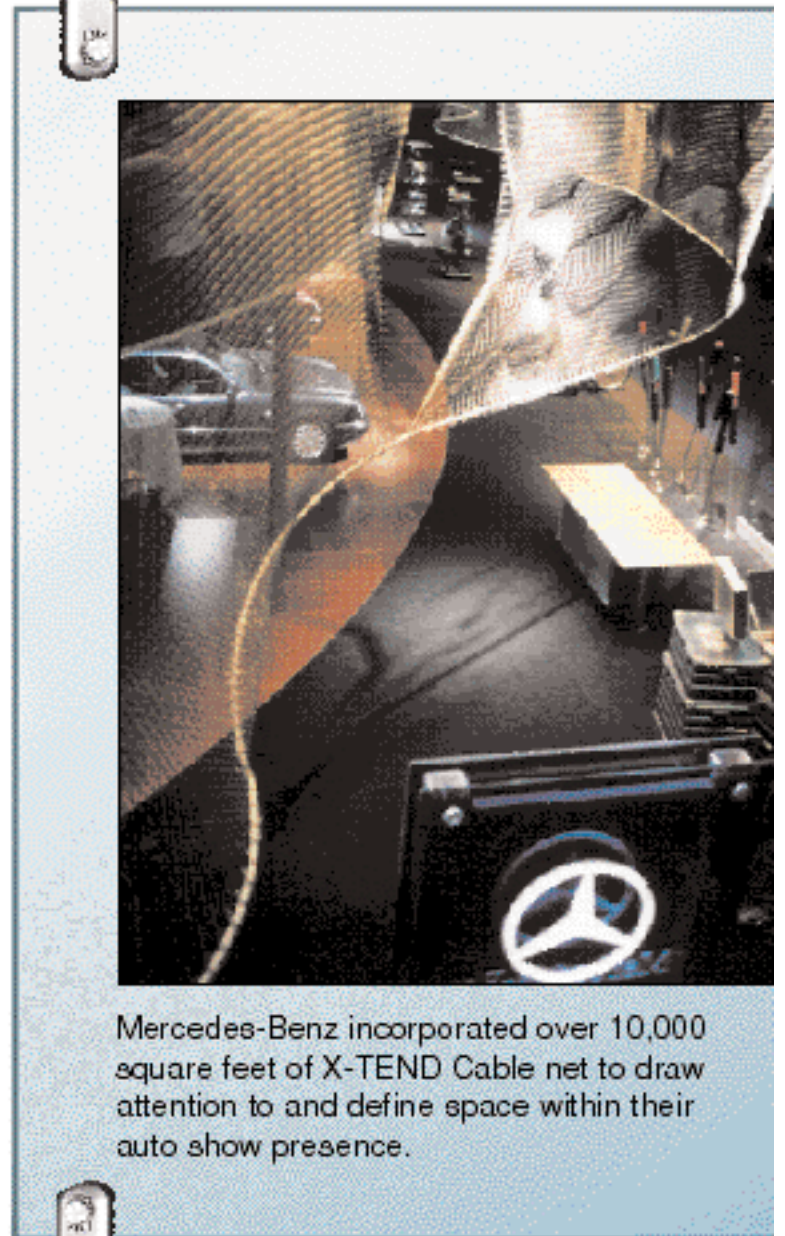
Their constructed nature meant the tapestries worked best on a large scale—and that coincided with the direction of mid-twentieth-century architecture. “The big tapestries have a huge advantage in that they fill up space,” Korda notes. “If all of a sudden the architecture is built around space, you need something to fill it up.” Modernist architects such as Bunshaft recognized that Jan’s works were particularly suited to their stark, expansive spaces. They lent a visual warmth that paralleled the insulating quality of medieval tapestries.

Jan not only brought tapestry back into its own as an art form, he made it modern. Although his latest designs were created in the 1970s, they are still stunningly contemporary. “It was because of Jan’s mastery and originality that tapestry became recognized as a fine art during his lifetime,” Russell says. “Even today the Yoorses are held up as the standard by which all other tapestry makers are judged. Their technique is superb.”

But perhaps the family’s biggest achievement is the way they successfully interwove their lives and work. “Jan conceived the way he wanted to live and managed not only to carry it out but to bring a whole cast of characters to share it with him—and he made that work until the very end,” Korda says. “The amazing thing is that they keep it up.” With Annabert and Marianne still together to share the memory of Jan’s passion for life, not to mention the work he left behind, his presence is still very strong. As Annabert puts it, “He is giving us direction from above.”

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Cathryn Drake is a travel addict who has visited the Gypsies in Romania but, unlike Jan Yoors, was not adopted by them.



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