

European Tapestry Forum: An artist-led tapestry initiative

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European Tapestry Forum is a Europe-wide organisation of professional tapestry weavers which has been working now for the better part of ten years to raise the profile of tapestry as an art form – and to provide a platform for tapestry artists. ETF wants to bring tapestry weavers together for collaboration and cooperation; exchange of ideas; learning and training. With its regular juried ARTAPESTRY exhibitions, ETF provides a showcase for work by contemporary tapestry artists, and an opportunity for their works to be exposed to a larger European audience.

A bit of background:

ETF is an artist-led, voluntary initiative. Its members are tapestry weavers who are active in their home countries, and who exhibit internationally. We all work free of charge, and to some extent fund our activities ourselves, notably our travel expenses to meetings and the exhibition openings. I will speak more about funding later.

Our history, if we can speak of history after such a relatively short time, looks like this:

At the turn of this century, a group of forward-thinking Danish tapestry artists organised a seminar and workshop entitled 'Back to Basics'. About 20 or 22 tapestry artists from ten countries across Europe attended; from Denmark and Scandinavia to the UK, the Czech Republic and Poland.

The discussions at that first meeting in Denmark were those familiar to anyone involved in the tapestry and textile art fields. (*We have had them here in Paris, in the past two days as well.*):

- *how to raise the status and visibility of tapestry as an art form in the visual arts and the wider world;
- * how to encourage new generations of artists to choose tapestry as their mode of expression;
- * how to stimulate critical writing and thought about the medium.

The organisation ETF developed around a core of tapestry artists who attended that original meeting. In 2001, the Steering Committee was formed.

Basically, our goal is to improve the visibility of woven tapestry as an art form in Europe. We want to show the interested general public, the museum world, and the art critics that tapestry exists as a *current, contemporary fine art discipline*.

We consider ETF and our ARTAPESTRY shows a platform for tapestry artists. European Tapestry Forum was set up by tapestry weavers for tapestry weavers.

The Steering Committee decided on four major programme planks:

- 1) A Secretariat, which was set up in Denmark;
- 2) A triennial exhibition, which became known as ARTAPESTRY;
- 3) Master classes*;

(*We have held one with U.S.-based tapestry weavers Archie Brennan and Susan Martin-Maffei in Denmark two years ago, and will be holding another, with Swedish tapestry artist Helena Henmarck, at Skærbæk in Denmark in June. I believe there are still some places open on that course.)

- 4) And a website – www.tapestry.dk

The original Steering Committee had members from Denmark and Norway, Sweden and Finland, the United Kingdom and Germany. They were soon joined by tapestry artists from the Czech Republic and France.

The Steering Committee meets several times a year for a day and a half. That means one day for travel, an evening meal the first night (which is informal and chatty and where we catch up), and then a meeting the next morning at 9 a.m. sharp which runs through 4 p.m. At 4, there is usually a mad dash for trains or taxis to the airport or a rush to the Autobahn and the trip home. The idea is to keep costs down.

Our early meetings were long and involved as there was so much to discuss, so much to decide. As time has gone on, we have been running very tight, efficient meetings, as many decisions have been made, and our discussions are of a practical nature now.

With different countries and individuals involved, we had to come together as a group, and agree on key issues. Initially, we had to decide on the format of the exhibition, how to set it up. Should it be biennial or triennial? Should it be open submission? Should there be any restrictions? Should we additionally invite some artists to show, thus circumventing the application process? What about the committee members? How should their applications be handled? Should the jury members – those who are tapestry artists – be invited to show a piece?

In the end, we decided that the exhibition should be triennial for now, partly for organisational reasons, and because tapestry is a slow medium. It would be hard for artists to create large pieces every two years.

After much deliberation, we decided on the following, simple definition of tapestry as being: *a weft-faced fabric, hand-woven by the artist or artists, with discontinuous wefts.*

We came up with the following guidelines for artists:

- The exhibition is open to contemporary, professional tapestry artists who live and work in Europe. That includes Turkey and Russia, but not Israel.
- Artists may submit slide images of up to three works for consideration by the jury.
- Works must have been made in the previous three years.
- Minimum size: Woven area of one square meter. There is some leeway on size; the jury has the final say. There is a tendency in some countries towards large works; we did not want large and tiny next to each other.
- Artists must commit their work for a maximum two years as the exhibition will tour to at least 3 European venues.
- Entry fee of €30 or €50. Some feel this keeps artists from some countries from submitting. But we need this fee – as it is, it barely covers some of our administrative costs and the costs for jurying.

We decided that ARTAPESTRY should be a juried show chosen by an independent panel of tapestry weavers, museum curators and experts. We decided on a large jury of five people as we were looking for a diversity of voices, and have looked both times for jurors from various countries as well as experts and museum people.

We called for submissions by putting out word through textile magazines, our website, the Internet, and through our personal contacts. This meant we sent many e-mails. We received hundreds of submissions for each of the ARTAPESTRY shows.

The selection process is as follows:

Artists are asked to submit slides to our Secretariat in Denmark. That is, exactly two slides – a full view and one detail.

These are then shown completely anonymously to our jurors in a three-day meeting at the Gammel Dok Arts Centre in Copenhagen. The Steering Committee is not involved in the jurying beyond being setting up the room and being on call to bring the jurors coffee, and paper and pencils, and to answer their questions.

This year, the jury consisted of:

Edit Andras, art historian and art reviewer from Budapest;
Wlodzimierz Cygan, tapestry artist and professor from Lodz, Poland;
Annika Ekdahl, tapestry artist and educator from Sweden;
Fiona Mathison, tapestry artist and educator, Edinburgh/Scotland/UK;
Bernard Schotter, administrator of Les Gobelins in France.

For ARTAPESTRY (1), the jury consisted of:

Archie Brennan, tapestry artist from the UK/US;
Shelly Goldsmith tapestry artist and educator from the UK;
Jan Groth, artist and tapestry designer from Norway;
Marcel Marois, tapestry artist and educator from Canada;
Nina Hobolth, museum director and curator, Aalborg/Denmark;

It is important that the jury consist not only of tapestry artists. A non-tapestry artist or an art historian or critic may have a fresh view of things. We have among other things considered having a sculptor or a painter on the next jury, and have talked about putting a young art student or someone who has recently finished their studies on the next panel.

Cooperation with museums:

We started the first ARTAPESTRY show with firm commitments from two museums: The aforementioned Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum in Aalborg and Deutsches Textilmuseum in Krefeld in Germany. We met in Aalborg early on with Nina Hobolth from Aalborg and Brigitte Tietzel from Krefeld to discuss cooperation. Having them on board from the start was a key to the success of this project.

ARTAPESTRY opened at Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum in Aalborg in November of 2005, and travelled on to Deutsches Textilmuseum in Krefeld in Germany the following January before ending the tour at the musée Jean Lurçat in France.

This time around, for ARTAPESTRY2, we opened in Aalborg, again at Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, just a few weeks ago on November 7. The show travels on to Norway, to Vestlandske Kunstinstrimuseum, that is the West Norway Museum of Decorative Art, where it will open on February 7. The next stop will again be the musée Jean Lurçat in Angers, in December 2009 for six months. The show then has one more stop – at the Konsthallen art museum in Luleå, Sweden.

We have been very fortunate to work with these wonderful museums, some of which have a long history of showing textile art and tapestry. And we are especially pleased that two of the partners which have been with us from the start were also willing to take ARTAPESTRY2. These were Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum Aalborg, Denmark and the musée Jean Lurçat. I would like to say again that we are very pleased with the good cooperation we have had with Mme. De Loisy and her staff in Angers.

We have drawn up a Cooperation Agreement for our work with museums:

It is quite simple, organisationally: ETF provides a package consisting of the exhibition, which has been chosen by an international jury; a press kit and PR info, design for an invitation (which the museum may or may not use), and the catalogue.

The artists pay for shipping of the works – and insurance – from their studios to the first museum in the tour. The museums pay for insurance for the artwork while in their care; they put on an opening, and take care of any educational activities or guided tours during the show, and they pay for onward transport and insurance for the complete exhibition to the next museum. For this complete package, which includes a previously agreed number of catalogues, each museum pays a set exhibition fee to ETF. The number of catalogues varies greatly from country to country. The museum may buy additional catalogues from us at a wholesale price. The fees help us to cover administrative costs and pay for the production of the catalogue.

We developed this model after we decided – with Aalborg and Krefeld – that applying for EU funding was not an option for this project at that time. There are various issues that make it difficult, including that this is a project that works in many countries. (It would be easier if we were dealing with two countries, both in the EU.) Also, stringent EU accounting rules and the paperwork involved made it too difficult for us to do at this stage in our development, running as we do on the powers of volunteers working in their free time.

The funding situation is difficult but not impossible. I feel, however, that we will need to find outside funding soon. With ARTAPESTRY3 on the horizon, we will soon have been at this for more than a decade; it would be nice if we could fund our Steering Committee members' travel expenses, for example. But our model has given us the flexibility that comes with working with a small group of people.

At the moment, our Steering Committee consists of the following people:

Margrethe Agger (Denmark); Anet Brusgaard (Denmark); Ariadna Donner (Finland); Peter Horn (Germany); Fiona Hutchison (Scotland/UK); Anne Jackson (England/UK); Katherine Lavocat (France); Renata Rozsivalová (Czech Republic) and me, Thomas Cronenberg (Germany).

This group has been quite stable. Most of us have been involved in two rounds of ARTAPESTRY. Anne Jackson joined us after ARTAPESTRY(1), and Ariadna Donner more recently.

Our collaborative model of working *is a pragmatic response to our needs*. We have little hierarchy, and each have designated areas we concentrate on. Basically, we have a sub-committee system, which I also call a “buddy system”. We have broken down the big job into areas of work:

- *general administration/Secretariat;
- *preparation of the call for entries;
- *jurying;
- *contact with museums;
- *PR and publicity;
- *catalogue preparation.

The buddy system comes in here: Every member has close contact with one or two people on the Steering Committee, usually from his or her region.

Margrethe Agger and Anet Brusgaard deal with everything in Denmark, cooperation with the museum in Aalborg, setting up jurying meeting.

Anet Brusgaard runs the Secretariat, assisted by Margrethe Agger.

Katherine Lavocat and Renata Rozsivalová worked on the call for entries.

Fiona Hutchison, Peter Horn and I do the catalogue, while Fiona Hutchison, Anne Jackson and I do PR in English.

All of us do outreach to museums, asking museums in our countries whether they are interested. Coordination with museums has usually been handled geographically. The Danes deal with Aalborg, I handled Krefeld; and Katherine and I both coordinated efforts with Angers.

The Steering Committee has have developed a way of working that takes into account that fact that we are all busy people with multiple roles – for example artist, weaver, teacher, writer/journalist, committee member. ETF is not the only initiative our members support: Many of us are also active in our home countries, for example in the Danish tapestry group, the Society of Scottish Artists, or the British Tapestry Group, to name just three.

Our system works in such a way that if one person is busy or away, his buddy can take care of immediate tasks. Anet may call me and say, “I need a letter (in English)” If I can’t write it today, I may ask Fiona Hutchison or Anne Jackson to take care of it, or if it is in French, I ask Katherine Lavocat for help.

None of this would work as easily without e-mail and mobile phones. They are probably the most essential working tool we have. We are all very busy people, but we are always reachable via e-mail. So we answer e-mails at 1 in the morning if need be. All of this has helped.

At the moment, we do not have the funding or the manpower to employ an administrative assistant, or any staff. But the buddy system which we have developed means that we are getting better and better at communication with the artists and museums, making sure they get swift answers to their questions.

And of course it helps that we are already on our second installment of ARTAPESTRY, and already looking ahead to ARTAPESTRY3. We spent a lot of time figuring out what we want to do, and how we would go about it. It gets a little easier each time because we can draw on our earlier experience.

When you finally get to the opening, you think: “I don’t know what all the fuss is about – it’s just a matter of getting some tapestries to Denmark and getting them up on the wall.”

But if I look into my computer, which I did to write this speech, I find 30 file folders relating to European Tapestry Forum, including the major headings called ARTAPESTRY1 and ARTAPESTRY2. The ARTAPESTRY2 folder alone has 28 sub-folders. And of course, I have written countless e-mails.

So it is a whole lot of work – but it is also a lot of fun. Instead of sitting back and lamenting the lack of visibility of tapestry as a fine art discipline, we are doing something to get tapestry out there, onto museum walls, and into the newspapers, magazines and specialist journals.

We have seen mainstream titles like the Danish daily newspaper *Politiken* or the fashion magazine *Elle* write about our shows, not to mention articles in specialist journals like *FiberArts* and *Textilforum*.

Let me close by showing a few images:

- 1) The Steering Committee;
- 2) Images from ARTAPESTRY2 at Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum;
- 3) Images from ARTAPESTRY(1) from the musée Jean Lurçat et de la tapisserie contemporaine in Angers.

Thank you for your interest.