

## AUBUSSON

For a change one year we had crossed the English Channel from Southampton to Cherbourg, then had driven up to Paris and down to Italy, but the traffic had been so bad we decided that we would take a different route home. When we reached Lyon we headed west over the Massif Central and then north up through Poitiers to Cherbourg and avoided Paris.

We planned our route by using the *Michelin Guide's* list for three-star hotels. The road happened to pass through Aubusson where the guide said there was an old hotel with a good restaurant, so we decided to stay there the night and see the town's famous Tapestry Museum the next morning.

We arrived in the late afternoon and fortunately the Hôtel de France had room for us. Everything was well over a hundred years old, including the bathroom. The floorboards creaked magnificently and the enormous bed had a valley in the middle. It was all perfect and once settled in we went for a walk around the ancient town perched on the banks of a gushing river.

I can't remember how I became intrigued by tapestries in the first place, but I think it was probably from a visit we had made to The Cloisters in New York to see the fabulous Unicorn, woven in the Netherlands in 1500.



*The Unicorn in Captivity*

Aubusson became a centre for tapestries in the 17th century when a Flemish Princess married the owner of the town's castle and, as part of her dowry, she had brought a retinue of weavers with her and set up a workshop. Very soon the town became famous for its tapestries, which presumably she had woven to hang on her damp castle walls.

The Hôtel de France was owned by a family, the father being the chef. He was a wonderful old character and could he cook! His 'lamb's brains in black butter' was a dish to be dreamt about for ever. Dinner was so good it required another walk around the old town before turning in.

Next morning we went to the museum and found it shut! We discovered several shops that sold printed copies of tapestries but nothing done on Aubusson looms. Disappointed we returned to the hotel to pay the bill and leave. When I went to the desk I found the chef behind the counter and he asked if I had enjoyed the museum. I explained that in fact we were really disappointed, because it was closed. He picked up the telephone, spoke, and said, "My friends would be delighted to show you their atelier."

The chef drew a map and we drove to Madame Suzanne Goubley's atelier. We were greeted at the door by a very stylishly dressed woman in her late seventies, who took us on one of the most intriguing tours we have ever made. The three-storeyed mill in which the Goubleys lived was also the workshop, the top floor being where the looms were housed. The south wall of the loft was all glass, allowing sunlight to flood the enormous room.



*Tapestry by the monk 'Dom Robert'*



The looms were the same design as those that had been brought to Aubusson by the Princess 300 years before, being horizontal rather than vertical as is usual. A bench was fixed to the front of the loom and the wood was as smooth as satin from hundreds of years of weavers' bottoms sliding up and down them. The room smelt of wool and Madame Suzanne told us that they only used the finest merino wool from Australia, which pleased us greatly.

The paper cartoon of the tapestry is spread under the warp so the weaver can follow the pattern exactly. It was a joy to watch the women working as their fingers moved like lightning. The fascinating thing was that they work looking at the reverse of the tapestry because they have to tie off the threads at the back, which means they never see the front until it is finished. The tapestry is a mirror image of the cartoon so the signature has to be written in reverse!

After our tour Madame Suzanne and her husband asked us to their apartment for coffee and gâteaux. What a sitting room! It was one of those mixtures that the French are so good at, the very old and very modern. One wall was completely covered with a gigantic tapestry, some 15 feet across by 12 feet high. It was an original work by Dom Robert, a famous monk who had only just died. Madame Suzanne's atelier had woven all his tapestries.

I was so excited by everything I asked Madame if she would consider weaving a tapestry for me. "*Certainement.*" We drove away having had an enthralling morning with the woman whose father had been employed by Queen Victoria to mend her tapestries at Windsor Castle!

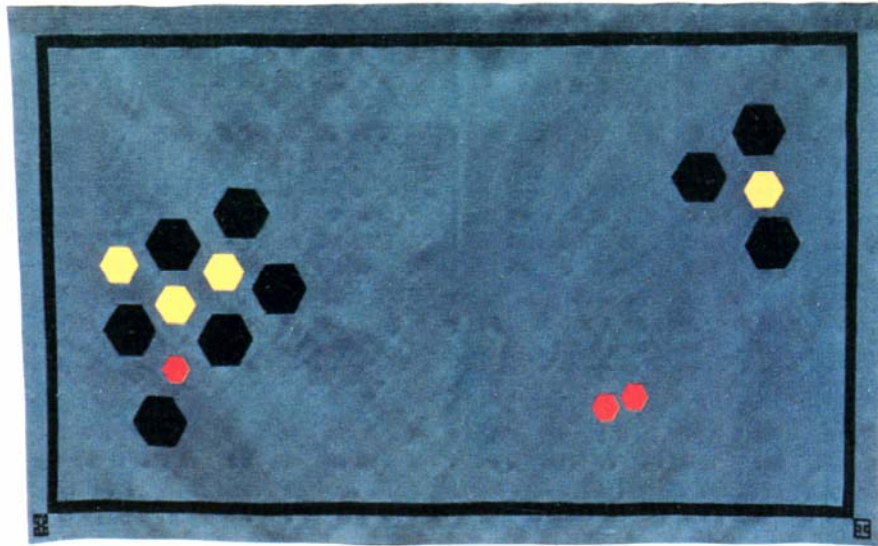
On the trip home I began to think about symbolic subjects that I had rejected as being impossible as sculptures and wondered if perhaps some of them could be adapted to a two-dimensional form.

Perhaps what followed was because of my concentrating on my new challenge! Margie and I were still both in our early forties so to save money when we made trips to Italy we used to take the tent that we had used on our Grand Traverse over the Alps with the boys. It was an incredible thing that looked like an upturned boat, was easy to erect, completely watertight and weighed nothing. Our policy was to sleep alternate nights in hotels and the tent. Having spent the previous night at the Hôtel de France we were due a night under canvas on the drive up to Cherbourg.

As the light began to fail we found a lovely spot off the main road soon after passing through a little town where we had noticed a promising restaurant. After a fine dinner we returned and erected the tent in a jiffy in the car's headlights and I set the alarm clock for six o'clock. As we dropped off to sleep it started to pour with rain.

When the alarm went off it was still pitch black being winter and the rain had turned to a torrential downpour. We struggled out of our bags and I made our usual breakfast by mixing orange juice with ready-cooked porridge. When we were dressed we bolted outside and collapsed the tent, pushed it into the back of the station wagon and drove away. After we had been going for a couple of hours we both started to wonder why it was still pitch dark outside, so I turned on the interior light to look at my wristwatch and, to my horror, saw that it was only four o'clock! We both started to laugh as we realised what had happened. I hadn't used the clock since our last trip to Australia and I had set the alarm without checking the time it was due to go off! I pulled over into the first lay-by we came to and within seconds we were both asleep. Needless to say we did not have another breakfast on waking!

On arriving home I started to think seriously about a tapestry design. I had had some ideas about *Spring*, *Summer*, *Autumn* and *Winter*, but had rejected them as not being possible. I then thought of *Water Planet* based on the 'I Ching'. Once I started, all sorts of subjects popped into my mind, such as, *Galaxies*, *Time*, *Love Union*, *Trust Bonds*, *Tribe*, and *Beyond Light*. The problem was which one would I choose? I sat by our pond looking at the water lilies as the goldfish swam beneath them. *Tranquillity*. It was impossible. I would do all the designs on graph paper with Golden Mean proportions of 36 inches by 58 inches and then make up my mind as to which ones should be woven as tapestries.



*Tranquillity*



*Trust*

While I was working on the tapestries a letter arrived from Australia asking me if I would be interested in entering a competition to do a sculpture for the marble foyer of the newly built Bank of New South Wales in Melbourne. I

accepted the challenge and to my utter surprise won the commission to do the 15-foot high sculpture I called *The Universe*.

This meant that I now had money to spend on the tapestries, so maybe I could have three or four done if the price was right. In fact this commission also allowed me to have several of the Symbolic maquettes enlarged as well, so *The Universe* completely changed my life in all sorts of ways. I drew the spiral on the floor of Enzo's studio in Pietrasanta using a paint tin and a length of string attached to a pencil.

Margie and I drove down to Italy to see the sculpture before it was polished. We took our friend Sue with us and laughed all the way, some nights all crowding into the tent, but mainly finding wonderful small hotels.

Seeing the sculpture propped against the foundry wall for inspection was one of the most exciting things that has ever happened to me and something I shall never forget. The circle is the Chinese symbol for the Universe, the spiral symbolises Consciousness and the stick figure is Man.



*'The Universe', Fonderia Mariani*



Things were looking pretty good and it was time for a new adventure so we went to see Madame Suzanne in Aubusson. We had made a booking at the Hôtel de France and were already looking forward to eating 'lamb's brains in black butter' again!

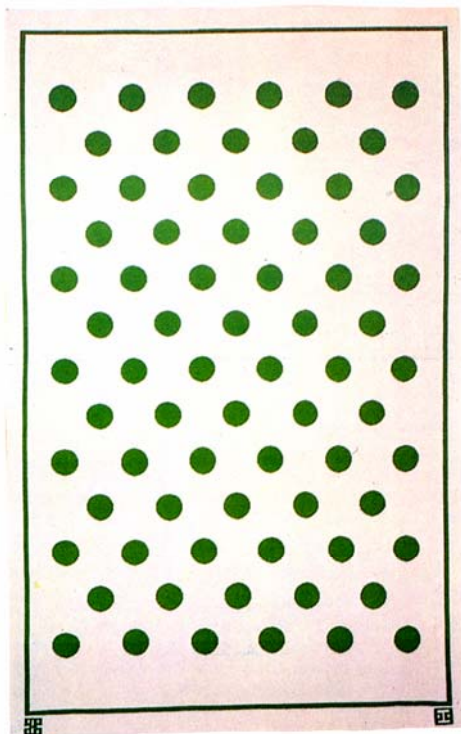


*The Universe*  
*Bank of New South Wales*

Madame Suzanne gave us a great welcome the next morning. I was feeling very nervous as I unrolled the paper cartoons of not one, but 12 tapestries! What would she say? Would they be possible to weave? How much would one cost and how many could I afford to do? We spent all of that day in the jewel box of a room choosing colours. Yes, she would like to do them and would work out a price that evening. It was a wonderful day and whatever happened it had been an incredible experience watching Madame use her expertise to match my choice of colours to her wool samples.



*'Love Union', Parliament House, Canberra*



*Spring*  
*Centre for Computational Biology, Montana State University*

*Autumn*



Next morning we returned to hear the verdict on how many could be done before having to make the choice of which ones to leave out. Yet more coffee and gâteaux, but this time with pencil and paper. Madame Suzanne announced that she thought the cartoons would make a fine series so I should have them all woven and she could then give me a special price! We accepted her offer and she told us to go away and come back in one year's time.

We returned a year later to collect the tapestries. What an exciting moment! We went into her storeroom and there on the table was a stack of tapestries. As each tapestry was revealed I saw for the first time the vibrant colours that had been added to my designs.

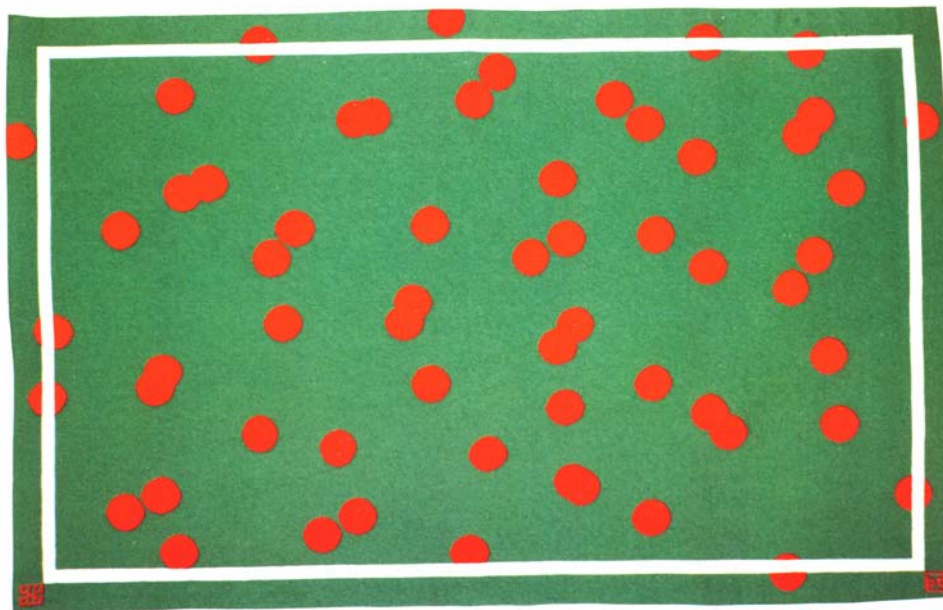


### *Time*

*As a stream running through a meadow*

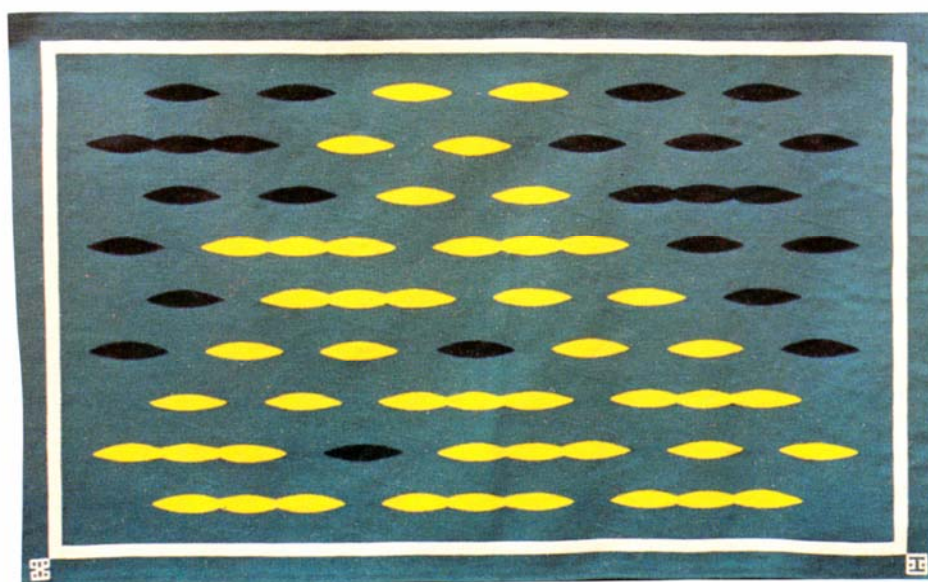
It was all a bit overwhelming. Running my hands over the finely woven wool was an amazing feeling. Because many of the designs are made up of straight lines and circles, the weavers had found the cartoons very hard to follow, but they had done a fantastic job and not one stitch was out of place. I couldn't wait to take some photographs so Margie and Monsieur Goubley took them outside for me, one at a time, into the winter sunlight. Unfortunately Madame Suzanne refused to be photographed so I only have my memory of this marvellous old lady.





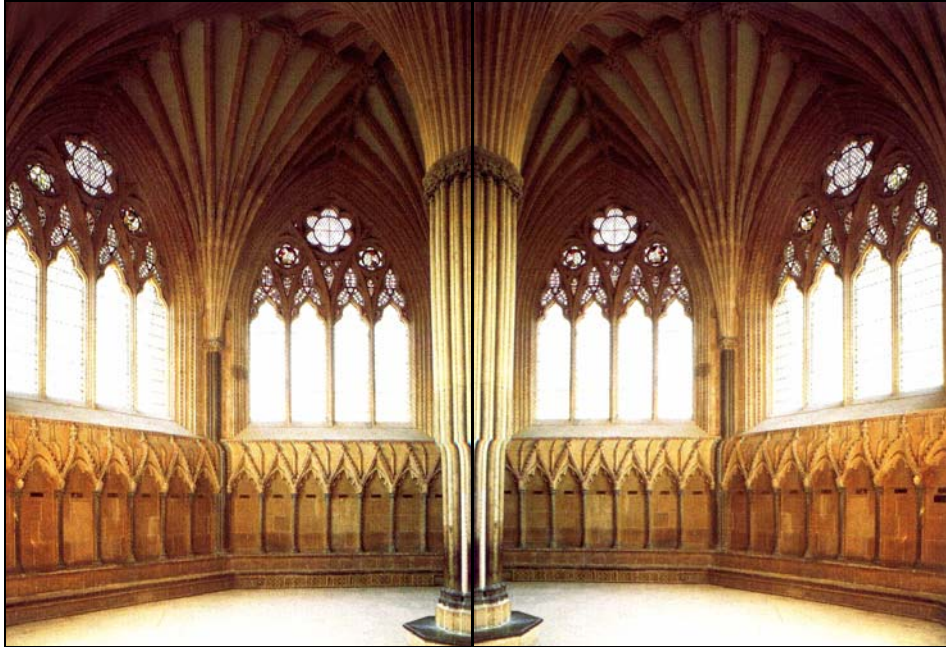
**Summer**  
*Poppies in a wheat field*

I was thrilled by the results and relished the thought that I must surely be the only Australian sheep farmer who had ever had tapestries woven at the famous Goubley Atelier in Aubusson out of wool from my own country. It is sad to think, when writing this, that the elegant Madame Suzanne and her charming husband have both died, that the atelier has closed and another ancient skill has disappeared for ever.



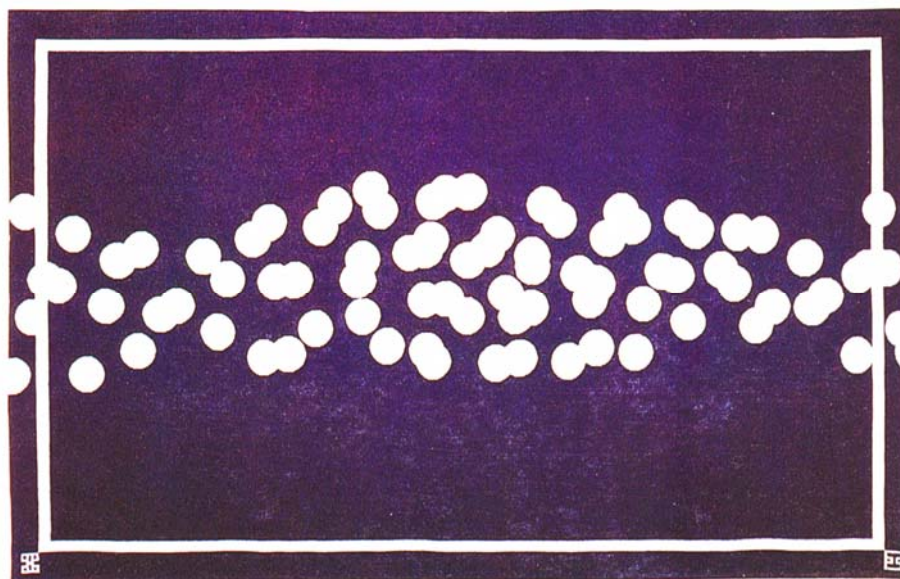
**Water Planet**  
*Using 'I Ching' symbols as 'sunlight on water'*

I had been asked to give an exhibition of my Symbolic Sculpture maquettes in the Wells Cathedral Chapter House, built in 1306. I was delighted by this request as it meant that I would show the tapestries for the first time in the most glorious medieval cathedral in England. The maquettes would sit on the vicars' seats and I could hang the tapestries above them.



*Wells Cathedral Chapter House*

Every day I would drive over to Wells and sit on duty with the tapestries and gaze in awe at the colours of the wool. The tapestries turned the room into a colourful jewel box. What an experience and what a privilege!



*Winter  
Milky Way*



This was the second time that I had had an exhibition in the Cathedral. Four years earlier Dean Patrick Mitchell had asked me if I would show my figurative maquettes in the Chapter House and the *Acrobats* in the Cloisters, in an attempt to raise money for the restoration work that was being done. I had agreed and it was because of this that Patrick had then asked me if I would do some work on the 14th century sculptures on the West Front.



*Wells Cathedral*  
*The West Front of England's finest medieval building –*  
*the Twelve Apostles are above the central windows*

My job was to copy in plasticine four of the heads of the Twelve Apostles that stand in a row below the top centre statue of Christ. The whole of the West Front was covered in scaffolding as the entire face was being cleaned. Some of the finest 14th century sculpture remaining in England is on this wall, as fortunately Cromwell and his Puritan Army did not use the Saints for target practice as they had done on many other cathedrals.

In Victorian times the authorities realised that some of the sculptures were loose so they had decided to cement them to the stone wall behind them. The problem now was that the stone used for the sculptures was softer than the cement making it impossible to remove them and put them in a museum. The only thing left to do was to put lime soaked cotton wool poultices on the stone and try to strengthen it against the pollution caused by the traffic's exhaust fumes and acid rain.

Before this was done Patrick wanted me to copy four of the heads in plasticine so they had a record of what they looked like before the lime treatment took place, which was a good idea as it turned out that the treatment altered the carvings quite considerably.

It happened to be the hottest June that we have ever had and working on the West Front was like working under the Australian sun again. The mornings were fine but by midday the temperature was up in the 90s and continued to steadily climb so that by four o'clock in the afternoon it had reached 100 degrees, which caused the plasticine to melt! To cut a long story short, I did eventually get the job done and the heads down off the scaffolding with Roy's help so he could take waste moulds and cast them in plaster.

I enjoyed doing the job and was mesmerised by the old stone carvings that had not been studied that closely, literally face to face, since the original sculptor had carved them 700 years before! I asked Roy to do a set of heads for me in stone resin from the moulds and they made a handsome foursome. They now guard the ruins of an ancient chapel in a wood in Wales.

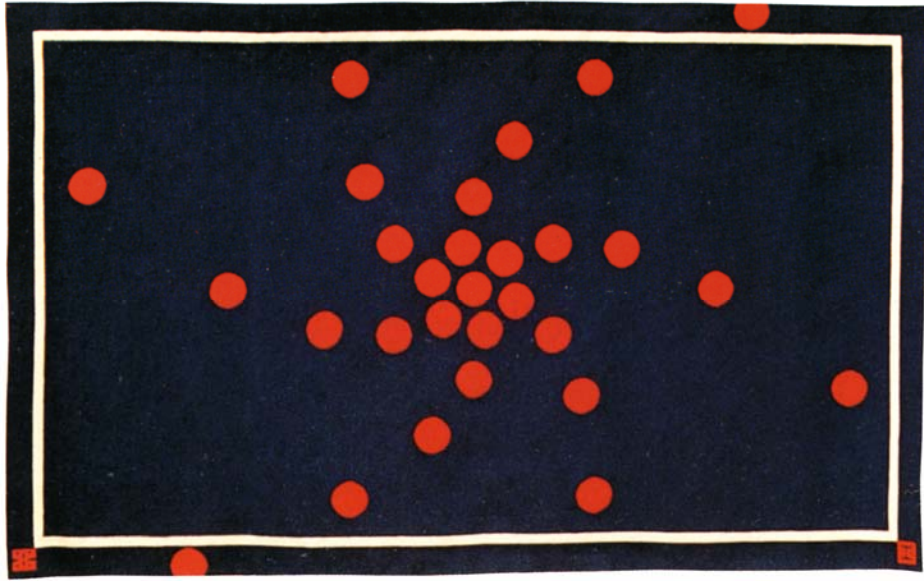


*Four of the 'Apostles' cast in stone resin*

I had grown to know many of the Cathedral wardens very well during the work and had been given a free run under the roof of the Cathedral. Walking through this space along giant oak beams that had been put in place all those years ago was a simply amazing experience.

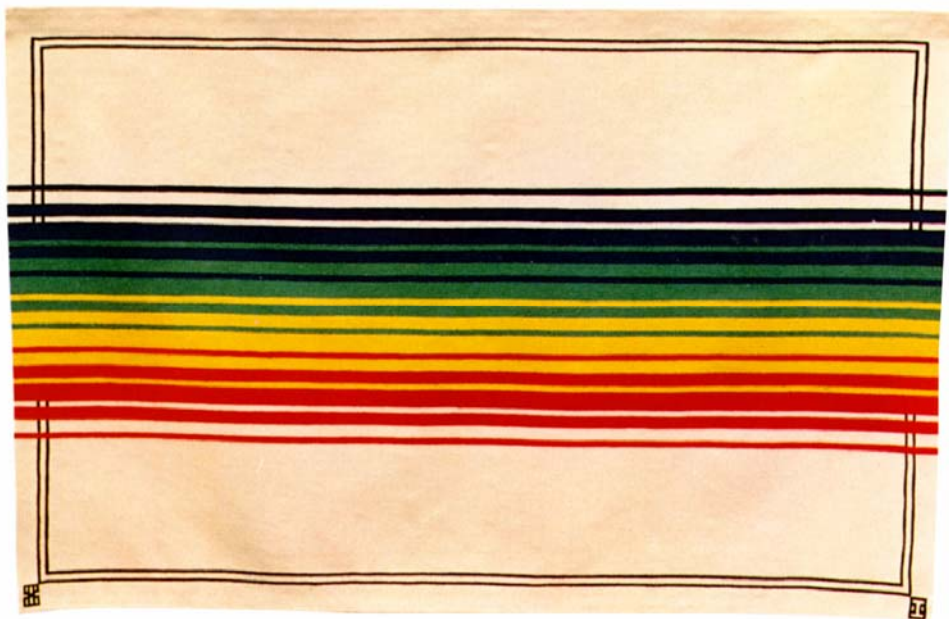
When Patrick had asked me if I would do another exhibition, this time of my Symbolic Sculpture maquettes and the tapestries, I was of two minds about agreeing. It was the first time that I had shown any of my Symbolic work to anyone outside the family so it would be their debut onto the world stage! What would the public think? *Oh well, in for a penny in for a pound.* Patrick had seen the sculptures and had suggested the idea of exhibiting them so I presumed that he liked them, although I nearly had second thoughts when he told me that the Bishop of Bath and Wells was to open the exhibition! However, it all went off very well and everyone seemed pleased and the Cathedral did manage to make a little money.





*Galaxies*

Thank goodness I had agreed because on the very last day of the exhibition just before closing time as I was about to leave, a couple arrived in the Chapter House who changed my life. After walking around the exhibition they started to question me and soon found out that I was an Australian. They introduced themselves as Ron and Betty Beaver and told me that they came from Canberra where they ran the Beaver Gallery. Ron asked me if I would like to show my Symbolic Exhibition in Australia. I replied, "If you can arrange a suitable venue I would be delighted to ship everything out to you." So began an unbelievable adventure and my friendship with a marvellous man.



*Beyond Light*

Before branching off into the Beaver story I must finish the Cathedral episode by mentioning Dea and Bernard Sterner's visit. Most of my visitors were casually-dressed sightseeing holidaymakers, so I was taken aback when an amazingly elegant woman swept in followed by a small thick-set man. They turned out to be a couple who lived near the town of Menerbe, not far from Aix-en-Provence. He was a South African and she was an Italian, but had grown up in Luxembourg.

In the war Bernard had worked for the Secret Service as a locksmith, and this had led him to designing a foolproof lock for sealing the dispatch cases carried by British couriers. The outcome of the Sterners' visit to the cathedral was that they asked us to call in on them and stay a night when we were returning from our next trip to the foundry in Italy. I agreed as we were due to do a trip a few weeks later to collect some new sculptures.

We were still using the tent and so a night in a bed with a bath on the way was always very welcome not to mention a free dinner! The little town of Menerbe is on the north side of the mountains that shelter Aix-en-Provence from the Mistral wind. The map showed a road over the mountain and the *Michelin Guide* said that there was a good restaurant just before you started to climb up into the foothills. I knew that the mountains were actually just a long limestone escarpment as we had driven past them several times. My map also said that it was a national park, so I thought that we would be able to find a place to pitch our tent without much trouble after dinner without anyone knowing for the night before we were meant to arrive at the Sterners'.

We found the restaurant and after a very good meal we set off under a full moon into the park to look for a tent site. Feeling very happy we soon discovered a sidetrack and some way down it we found a flat space for the tent. However, we had not taken into account the Mistral or that it was impossible to get the steel pegs into the rocky ground to keep the tent from blowing away! We gave up the unequal struggle and returned to the road that led down to the town of Apt to the north. Just outside the town we saw a sign pointing to a campsite that we decided to investigate because it was getting very late although the sign said it was closed.

We found the gate was unlocked so we crept in and soon had the tent up as there was not a breath of wind and the ground was soft. We crawled into our sleeping bags very ready for a well-earned sleep, but it was not to be as the night was full of the song of nightingales. We had never heard anything so beautiful and lay awake for half an hour listening to them singing.

Next morning we were up and away before anyone discovered us and headed into Apt for breakfast. We weren't due to reach the Sterners' home until mid-afternoon, so we spent the day exploring the little fortified medieval town of Menerbe that was in those days still undiscovered. I had read about the town in the book by my heroine Françoise Gilot, the model for the life-size *Mother and Child* figure that I had done at Marwood on arrival in England. Picasso had owned a house in Menerbe when he was married to Françoise, but like many French towns, during the day all the shutters were locked tight and the streets completely deserted so we found no one to ask which was his house, but it was fun to walk around trying to imagine where they had lived.

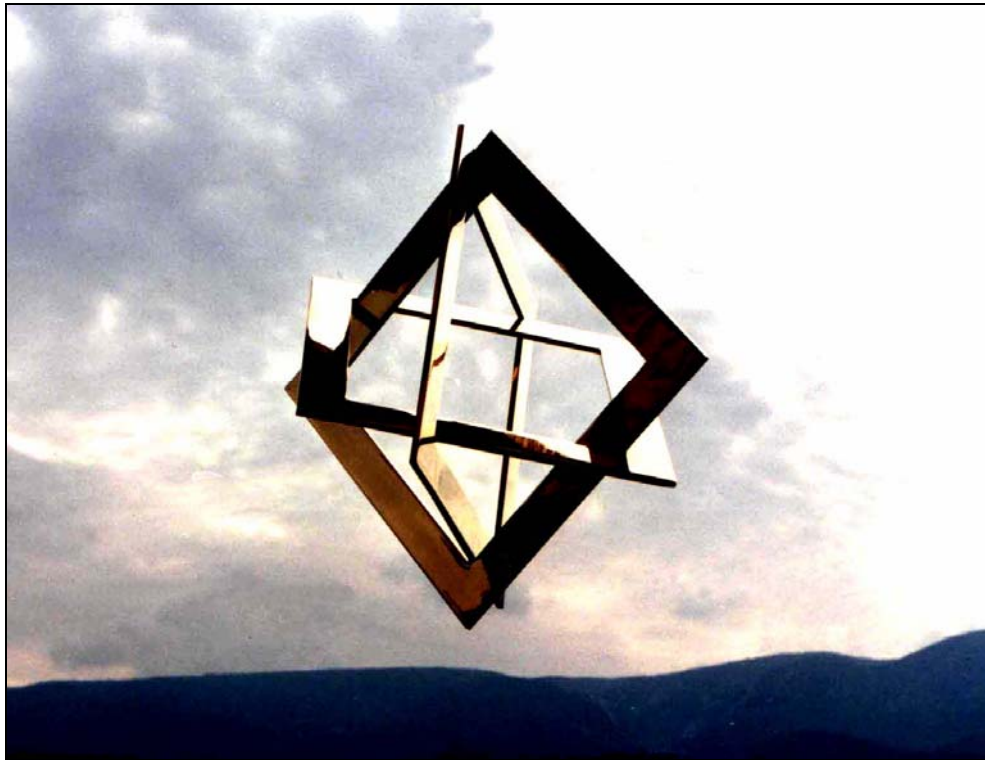
After the war Bernard had been very clever and bought a little wood-covered hill. The valley has several of these hills dotted along it and he had obtained permission to bulldoze the top off one and build a house amongst the scrub oaks. It was a lovely spot with incredible views, but thankfully when it



was completed the authorities realised that if any more such houses were built it would ruin the look of the countryside so banned anyone else doing the same thing to the other hills. It was too late to do anything about Bernard's house; so he and Dea kept their fabulous view. There was one drawback to the house, it was in the eye of the Mistral, which of course was the reason that nobody had ever built on the hilltops in the first place!

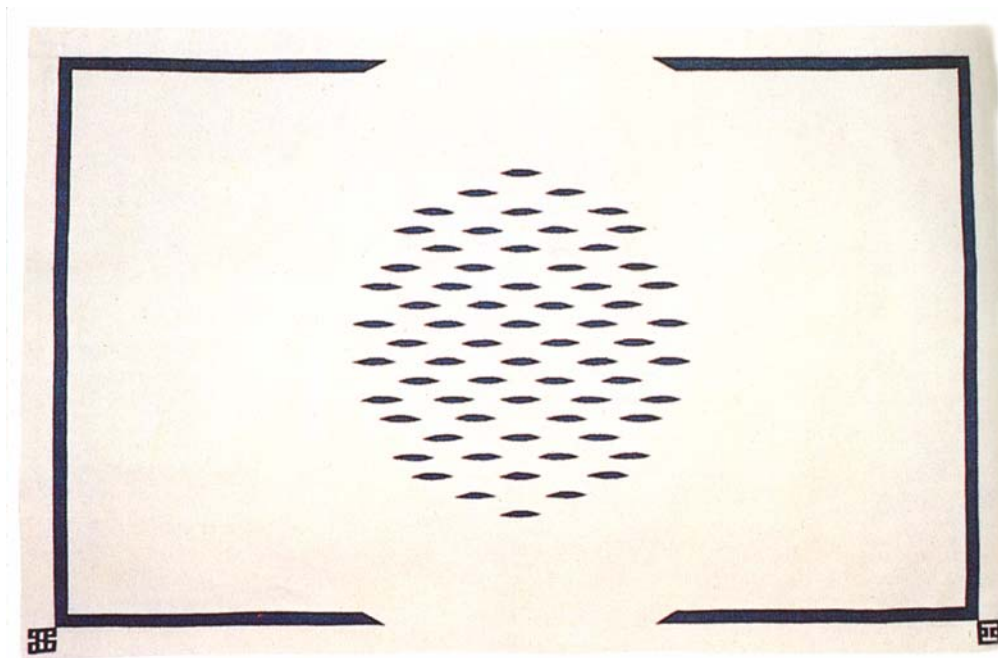
The woods around the house were laced with narrow paths that wandered this way and that between the scrub oaks. It was fun to explore these paths and one day we chanced upon a salamander. It was the fire variety with beautiful egg-yolk-yellow spots on its pitch-black eight inch long body. We had never seen one before and were fascinated. To think that they have the ability of being able to grow a whole new leg if it is bitten off is quite incredible and must be one of the miracles of nature.

We stayed several times with the Sterners on our way back from the foundry and every time we arrived they would insist on my showing them what I had in the back of the car. They ended up buying four maquettes and two museum-size sculptures over the next few years.



*'Creation' floating over Menerbe*

So ended the wonderful adventure of my working with the finest Tapestry Atelier in Aubusson. Meeting Madame Suzanne and her husband had been an incredible chance experience and their kindness to me was beyond comprehension. They were two of the gentlest people I have ever met. I was fortunate to have known them and I shall never be able to thank the chef of the Hôtel de France enough for arranging for us to visit the atelier. It had been another lucky day for me leading to another great friendship.



*Tribe*  
*As a shoal of fish*

The Aubusson Tapestries now hang in the Houses of Parliament in Canberra and the offices of both Peat Marwick and North Broken Hill in Melbourne. A complete set hangs in Dr John Miller's Centre for Computational Biology, a department of the Montana State University.

A set was bought by C T Bowring and Co and hung in their new offices by the Tower of London. This was an in-house purchase by my step-brother, Peter Bowring, who was then chairman of the company!



*Bonds of Friendship*



But now I must write about my friend, Ron Beaver. Our chance meeting in Wells Cathedral played such an important part in my life it is fitting that I should start *Volume II* with his story, *because he changed my life from top to bottom.*



***Acrobats***  
*Australian Institute of Sport, Canberra*