



**FIG. 1**  
Le Corbusier's coffin in front  
of the tapestry *Les Dés sont  
jetés*, 1st September 1965.  
Photo: Robert Cohen. FLC.

# WEAVING WORDS

## LE CORBUSIER AND JEAN LURÇAT BETWEEN TAPESTRY AND POETRY

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**Abstract:** Before his funeral service in the Cour Carrée of the Louvre on 1 September 1965, the body of Le Corbusier (1887-1965) lay with his tapestry *Les Dés sont jetés* (1960) as a backdrop. This article examines the place and significance of tapestry in Le Corbusier's wider career as an architect, artist and poet, bringing out the ways in which his woven works of 1948 onwards are intricately connected to his thinking across media. Jean Lurçat (1892-1966), the protagonist of modern tapestry design, is usually sidelined in art historical analysis. In bring these two figures together, I find a point of encounter not only in their engagement with tapestry as a form of resistance and revolution via a medieval model, but also in their different uses of poetry in the broadest sense. Close readings of the imagery of the tapestries alongside the writings of the artists themselves, Paul Éluard and Stéphane Mallarmé reveal surprising connections.

**Keywords:** Le Corbusier; Jean Lurçat; tapestry; poetry; Pierre Baudouin.

**Résumé :** Avant ses funérailles à la Cour Carrée du Louvre le 1er septembre 1965, le corps de Le Corbusier (1887-1965) gisait en état avec, pour toile de fond, sa tapisserie *Les Dés sont jetés* (1960). Cet article examine la place et l'importance de la tapisserie dans la carrière plus large de Le Corbusier en tant qu'architecte, artiste et poète, mettant en évidence les façons dont ses œuvres tissées à partir de 1948 sont intimement liées à sa pensée à travers les médias. Jean Lurçat (1892-1966), le protagoniste de l'histoire de la tapisserie moderne, est généralement mis à l'écart dans l'histoire de l'art. En réunissant ces deux figures, je trouve un point de rencontre non seulement dans leur engagement avec la tapisserie comme forme de résistance et de révolution sur un modèle médiéval, mais aussi dans leurs utilisations différentes de la poésie au sens large. Une analyse soignée de l'imagerie des tapisseries aux côtés des écrits des artistes eux-mêmes de Paul Éluard et de Stéphane Mallarmé révèlent des connexions surprenantes.

**Mots-clé :** Le Corbusier; Jean Lurçat; tapisserie; poésie; Pierre Baudouin.

**Resumen:** Antes de su funeral en el Cour Carrée del Louvre el 1 de septiembre de 1965, el cuerpo de Le Corbusier (1887-1965) yacía con su tapiz *Les Dés sont jetés* (1960) como telón de fondo. Este artículo examina el lugar y la importancia del tapiz en la carrera más amplia de Le Corbusier como arquitecto, artista y poeta, y resalta las formas en que sus obras tejidas de 1948 en adelante están intrincadamente conectadas a su pensamiento a través de los medios. Jean Lurçat (1892-1966), el protagonista del diseño moderno de tapices, generalmente se deja de lado en el análisis histórico del arte. Al reunir estas dos figuras, encuentro un punto de encuentro no solo en su compromiso con el tapiz como una forma de resistencia y revolución a través de un modelo medieval, sino también en sus diferentes usos de la poesía en el sentido más amplio. Lecturas detalladas de las imágenes de los tapices junto con los escritos de los propios artistas, Paul Éluard y Stéphane Mallarmé revelan conexiones sorprendentes.

**Palabras clave:** Corbusier; Jean Lurçat; tapiz; poesía; Pierre Baudouin.

1. Trans. by AS Kline (2018), [https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/MallarmeUnCoupdeDes.php#anchor\\_Toc160699751](https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/MallarmeUnCoupdeDes.php#anchor_Toc160699751) Consulted 17 June 2020.

2. ["I salute you from the severe threshold of the tomb".] The eulogy is reprinted in André Malraux, *Oraisons funèbres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). Translations are the author's unless otherwise stated.

3. Christopher Green's work on the artistic output of Le Corbusier remains foundational: Christopher Green, "The Architect as Artist", in *Le Corbusier: Architect of the Century*, ed. by Michael Raeburn and Victoria Wilson (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1987), 110-130. Also Christopher Green, *Le Corbusier-Savina, Ineffable Monsters: Sculpture With and Against 'Architecture'* (Leeds: Leeds City Art Gallery/ The Henry Moore Institute, 2001).

4. See in particular KLH Wells, *Weaving Modernism: Post-War Tapestry Between Paris and New York* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019).

5. From 1925-1941 Jean Lurçat lived in the modernist home built for him by his brother in the Villa Seurat, Paris. In 1945, he purchased a medieval chateau in Saint-Laurent-les-Tours (Lot). The animosity between Le Corbusier and André Lurçat should not go unacknowledged.

6. Romy Golan borrows Le Corbusier's term "Muralnomad" as a title and methodology, but her focus is mural painting; the tapestries she does examine are Le Corbusier's large site-specific pieces for Chandigarh, which are quite different from the smaller-scale serial pieces with which this article is concerned. Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-57* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

## Introduction: The Dice are Cast

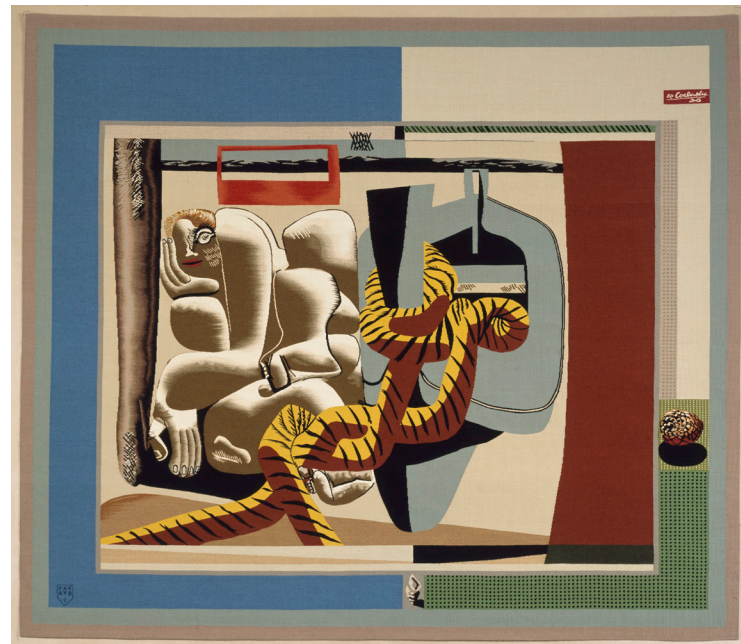
[...] ancestrally never to open the fist / clenched / beyond the helpless head / a legacy in vanishing / to someone / ambiguous / the immemorial ulterior demon / having / from non-existent regions / led / the old man towards this ultimate meeting with probability / this / his childlike shade / caressed and smoothed and rendered / supple by the wave and shielded / from hard bone lost between the planks / born of a frolic / the sea through the old man or the old man against the sea / making a vain attempt [...]

Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, 1897<sup>1</sup>

On 30 August 1965, Le Corbusier (1887-1965) aged 77, attended his "ultimate meeting with probability" in the sea at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. Before his funeral service in the *Cour Carrée* of the Louvre on 1 September, his body lay for a few hours near his studio at 35, rue de Sèvres. Behind it, providing a backdrop for the coffin and a talking point for those who came to pay homage, hung a version of his tapestry *Les Dés sont jetés* (1960) (Fig. 1). The appearance of the coffin, draped with the Tricolore flag and decorated with the *Légion d'honneur*, anticipated the words of André Malraux, writer, art critic and Minister of Cultural Affairs who, in his funeral eulogy, proudly addressed the Swiss-born architect on behalf of his adopted nation, France, citing words from Victor Hugo in his honour: "Je te salue au seuil sévère du tombeau!"<sup>2</sup> To sum up the career of the architect of whitewashed concrete villas and stacked, modular housing units through the media of tapestry and canonical French poetry might initially seem an unexpected choice; however, as this article will demonstrate, it was extremely pertinent on both counts. As Malraux himself stated, the maxim of the "machine for living in" for which Le Corbusier was perhaps best known is only half the story, and the architect was "more secretly" a poet.

Le Corbusier's long and varied career as an architect, artist and poet by now needs no introduction, and it has been tempting to simply explain the tapestries as one more experiment in his multimedia synthesis of the arts - a collaborative venture akin to the wooden sculptures he produced with Joseph Savina, perhaps, or alternatively a deeply personal form of expression, as in his paintings.<sup>3</sup> Equally, they could be understood as a natural return to the decorative arts tradition from which he emerged as a student in la Chau-de-Fonds. However they were also both part of and distinct from a much wider modernist revival of tapestry production. Tapestry's place in the history of modernism, and modernism's effect on the revival of the weaving tradition, has been considered elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> However one figure with whom modern tapestry production has become almost synonymous demands a place here: Jean Lurçat (1892-1966), brother of the CIAM architect André Lurçat (1894-1970), is as ubiquitous in histories of the French tapestry revival as Le Corbusier is in surveys of modern architecture; and yet remarkably little art historical attention has been devoted to him.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst the significance of the tapestry *medium* for both Le Corbusier and Lurçat, and even the process of design and manufacture, have been discussed to some degree, the complex *imagery* of Le Corbusier's woven works in particular has been sidelined.<sup>6</sup> In the general history of modern weaving, Marie Cuttoli (1879-1973) has been prioritised as patron of key modern artists from 1927 onwards, whilst Pierre Baudouin (1921-71), the



**FIG. 2**  
Le Corbusier, *Tapisserie Marie Cuttoli*, 1936. Tapestry in wool and silk, Atelier Picaud, Aubusson, 147 cm x 175 cm. FLC.

intermediary with whom Le Corbusier worked from 1948, has been largely ignored.<sup>7</sup> And whilst the Resistance imagery of Lurçat's tapestries has been well-documented, their textuality - the material nature of including text within the woven composition - has not been discussed.<sup>8</sup> Politics, in other words, has been prioritised over poetics. Poetry and the poetic were vital catalysts and outputs for both Le Corbusier and Lurçat, whether as written or quoted text or as creative metaphor, and are therefore central to an understanding of their work. This article seeks to read the tapestries of Le Corbusier and Lurçat in a new light and in relation to each other via their ideology, imagery and engagement with poetry in the broadest sense.

## Framing the Debate

The 1925 *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* provided an initial point of encounter for Lurçat, Le Corbusier and Cuttoli. Cuttoli's Maison Myrbor fashion house showed knotted rugs based on designs by Lurçat, who had been developing his career as a tapestry designer since 1917 and who simultaneously had two geometric rugs on display in the *Ambassade Française*. At the edge of the same exhibition site stood Le Corbusier's famously ill-fated *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau*, inside which Berber rugs (a jarring presence in the otherwise anti-decorative space) lay in stark contrast to the elegant post-cubist geometricism of Lurçat's designs.<sup>9</sup> Lurçat's rugs sold quickly, opening the way for Cuttoli's engagement with modern artists such as Fernand Léger and Georges Braque in the workshops of Aubusson, whilst Le Corbusier's *Pavillon* and the urban plans it represented provoked censure and distrust.

It was Cuttoli who was responsible for Le Corbusier's first tapestry in 1936 (Fig. 2). Known simply as *The Marie Cuttoli Tapestry*, it relates strongly in its subject matter to contemporaneous paintings by the architect, with the solid female figure constrained into the left hand section of the composition and the rope motif that had become so familiar in his series of bathers at Arcachon linking the figure to the geometricised forms of the *pinasse* (the long wooden narrow boat endemic to the Bay of Arcachon) on the right hand side.<sup>10</sup> The artistic and symbolic imagery that Le Corbusier developed during his yearly holidays at the Bassin d'Arcachon from 1926 to 1936, would be mined by him for the rest of his career. The integrated frame was a requirement of Cuttoli in the works of all the artists she commissioned, intended to reference the French tapestry tradition and reinforce the status of wall-hung tapestries as artworks. Here, however, Le Corbusier disrupts the clarity of the

7. See Maureen Shanahan, "Tapis/Tapisserie: Marie Cuttoli, Fernand Léger and the Muralnomad", *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/ Journal of Art History*, 83:3 (2014), 228-243. Also Cindy Kang (ed.), *Marie Cuttoli: The Modern Thread from Miró to May Ray* (Pennsylvania: Barnes Foundation, 2020). The only publication devoted specifically to Baudouin is a slim exhibition catalogue: *Baudouin: Tapisseries des peintres* (Aubusson/ Fécamp: Musée Départemental de la Tapisserie, 1991).

8. See Claire O'Mahony, "Renaissance and Resistance: Modern French Tapestry and Collective Craft", in *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 9:3 (2016), 265-288.

9. Tag Gronberg, in her analysis of the *Pavillon*, has considered the rugs and a number of Serbian pots also on display to be evidence of Le Corbusier's interest in "folklore" and a memory of his *Voyage d'Orient*. Tag Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity: Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) 133-137.

10. For a discussion of the figurative paintings of the 1930s, including the bathers, see Green, "The Architect as Artist" and Genevieve Hendricks, "Touching the Body: Le Corbusier's Figurative Works", in *Le Corbusier: The Measures of Man*, ed. by Olivier Cinqualbre and Frédéric Migayrou (Zurich: Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess AG, 2015), 120-127.

11. Flora Samuel has considered the motif of frames in Le Corbusier's architectural works in *Le Corbusier in Detail* (London: Routledge, 2007), 101-122.

12. Baudouin later insists on this point: "Le Corbusier tapissier n'est pas le même que Le Corbusier peintre". Pierre Baudouin, "Muralnomad", in *Le Corbusier lui-même*, ed. by Jean Petit (Geneva: Éditions Rousseau, 1970), 240-241.

13. "The painting is a signed object as much as it is a painted surface... the painted object becomes a cultural object by means of the signature". Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981) (London: Verso, 2019), 93-94.

14. See Simon Richards, *Le Corbusier and the Concept of Self* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 156. Also Marie-Jeanne Dumont, "The Open Hand: From Political Symbol to the Artist's Signature", in *Le Corbusier: The Measures of Man*, 134-141.

15. Le Corbusier ties the open hand to the gesture of offering in his *Poème de l'angle droit* (Paris: Tériade, 1955), section F3. The original plates of the *Poème* were exhibited alongside 17 of Le Corbusier's tapestries at La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1957.

16. Claude Faux, *Lurçat à haute voix* (Paris: Julliard, 1962), 54-55.

17. O'Mahony, "Renaissance and Resistance", 3-4.

18. See Martine Mathias et al, *Le Corbusier, L'oeuvre tissé* (Aubusson/Arras, Paris: Sers, 1987), 32.

framing device, incorporating multiple frames at once as he often did in his paintings. That of the 'picture within the picture', perhaps conceived as a canvas on an easel, is the most prominent, in broken greys and beiges, causing the central section to float, but for the shell which stands on its point at the bottom and precariously grounds it. The shell, and the pinecone to the right, presented as *trompe l'oeil* with their naturalistic shadows, refer to Le Corbusier's collection of *objets à réaction poétique* and the textured blocks of colour on which they sit recall the painted display alcoves that Le Corbusier incorporated in his interiors. Within the central image, a red form evokes the picture frame window found on the roof terrace at the Villa Savoye, and anticipates Le Corbusier's many other architectural frames, such as the one that would reach into the sky at La Tourette, possibly anchoring the thick black line behind as a displaced horizon line.<sup>11</sup> Le Corbusier reinforces the falsity of presenting tapestry as painting and instead insists on the varied ways in which his work might be understood or 'framed'.<sup>12</sup>

After a single collaborative effort, Le Corbusier withdrew from the relationship with Cuttoli. Both he and Lurçat eventually found her approach to be too engaged with luxury materials and the elitism of painting. This article, then, is concerned not with the Cuttoli experiment, but with the bringing together of Le Corbusier and Lurçat through their later works from the 1940s and 50s. They are linked initially by this narrative of rejecting luxury and engaging with tapestry as a form of resistance and revolution; it is there that we will begin.

## Imagery and Ideology

Looking closely at the imagery woven into the tapestries can tell us much about their production and ideology: as with Le Corbusier's buildings, the process and concept of creation is woven clearly into both the structure and the surface appearance. In Le Corbusier's *Trois femmes sur fond blanc* (1950) (Fig. 3), the right hand of the woman in blue, stylised like a fluted glass or bottle from a Purist painting, points to the signature of Le Corbusier. The other hand, open with the palm showing, points to the monogram of the Atelier Picaud, Aubusson, the tapestry workshop in which the piece was made. The signature, the hands and the workshop symbol speak to the relationship between the individual; mass-produced *objects-types*; and the ancient craft of tapestry-making. The signature here is a copy, woven in by the weavers. Alongside the workshop symbol, it is evidence of the collaborative nature of tapestry design and production as much as of authorship or individual expression. It functions like a brand name - a sign or indicator, as theorist Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) would have it, of the tapestry's status as an art object, but not of the artist's presence.<sup>13</sup> The juxtaposition of the signature with the hand complicates the situation further. It has been often noted that Le Corbusier, in his later years, adopted the open hand motif as a form of signature, especially at Chandigarh.<sup>14</sup> Yet here, we have hands of two types: the open palm, and the stylised fingers, and so the hand becomes both a functional object and a gesture of openness and offering: a contribution to the reformation of society.<sup>15</sup> It also relates to Le Corbusier's interest in classicism as a framework for harmonious, balanced composition, in that the fluted glass in the iconography of Purism intentionally recalls a fluted classical column. We might understand the *Trois femmes* as a version of the three graces, a reading that is immediately undercut by the corporeality of the writhing female forms, their racial and cultural identity unstable in spite of the red, white and blue colour scheme. The tapestry sums up a series of contradictions and ambiguities that were at the heart of Le Corbusier's career from the 1930s, and which are at the heart of the revival of tapestry production more generally.

Authorship and the level of control exerted by the patron, the artist or the weavers was a tension that was ever-present. As a student at the École nationale des arts décoratifs (ENAD, the design school set up in Aubusson in 1886), Lurçat knew the tapestry design process intimately, and used his own system of numbered cartoons to indicate to the weavers the colours and stitching styles required for the execution of his designs, carefully checking the finished article against his expectations.<sup>16</sup> Claire O'Mahoney has noted how Lurçat's exactitude and the restricted colour palette were in fact a threat to the agency of the weavers, limiting their freedom in interpreting the design into wool.<sup>17</sup> The narrative of Le Corbusier's approach to cartoon design, in contrast, betrays the fact that he knew little about the process to begin with. From 1948, he worked closely with Baudouin, collaborating on the realisation of ideas that he had been sketching since his first encounter with the tapestry medium in 1936.<sup>18</sup> Baudouin had been a tutor in Art History at the ENAD, and he sought the cooperation of artists to help revive the tradition of France's great tapestry workshops, liaising with the tapestry makers on their behalf. Baudouin's notes trace methods and problems, recalling how Le Corbusier's first car-

toon finally had to consist of a photograph of a sketch because the paint on the original was too flaky to be useful; the resultant tapestry was “not very convincing”.<sup>19</sup> After further experiments, students at the Lycée de Sèvres, under close supervision, were charged with the task of creating cartoons from the architect’s sketches or *papiers découpés*. Lurçat, Le Corbusier and the ENAD were aligned in insisting on the use of ready-dyed wools to keep down the costs of production and increase efficiency. Nonetheless, Le Corbusier’s correspondence with Baudouin reveals his keen involvement in choosing the correct colours.<sup>20</sup>

The innate reproducibility of the tapestry process was perhaps bound to appeal to Le Corbusier.<sup>21</sup> In ordering a small series of six of each of his designs, he used the advantages of efficient, labour-saving production to create several pieces from a single cartoon, but guarded their status as art objects with a carefully conceived ticket of authenticity on the reverse. The reference to the Purist glass in *Trois femmes* perhaps links the *objet-type* of the 1920s to the potential of tapestry to be an evolutionary tool within a domestic setting: art in architecture as constant and daily revolution.<sup>22</sup> In 1957, Le Corbusier invented the term “Muralnomad”,<sup>23</sup> expanding on it in 1960: “La tapisserie d’aujourd’hui [...] devient le ‘Mural’ des temps modernes. Nous sommes devenus des ‘nomades’ [...] ce mur de laine qu’est la tapisserie peut se décrocher du mur, se rouler, se prendre sous le bras à volonté, aller s’accrocher ailleurs”.<sup>24</sup> Whereas tapestries had once been produced for castles and churches, Le Corbusier envisaged them belonging to the transient inhabitant of his *Ville radieuse*: he even specified dimensions relating to the Modulor. In the event, just as his urban plans remained for the most part an ideal, so did the affordability of his tapestries. A document relating to the sale of *Trois Musiciennes* (1953) shows the division of profits: the total price of 120,000 francs would have been approximately three times the average yearly wage of a working class man at the time.<sup>25</sup> Most of the pieces were bought by museums, banks, restaurants and major art collectors.

Lurçat, in remarkably similar terms, extolled the portability and accessibility of the tapestry medium, in contrast to fresco painting in particular - an art form of which he had personal experience from an apprenticeship in



19. Mathias et al, *Le Corbusier, L'oeuvre tissé*, 29.

20. In a letter to Baudouin of 25 March 1949, Le Corbusier asks whether brighter colours might be found for his current project. FLC C31 583-584.

21. Wells claims reproducibility and portability, along with medium specificity, as key characteristics that align tapestry production with modernism. Wells, *Weaving Modernism*.

22. For more on Le Corbusier and architecture as revolution, see Mary McLeod, “‘Architecture or Revolution’: Taylorism, Technocracy and Social Change”, *Art Journal*, 43:2 (1983).

23. Le Corbusier, *Note à l'attention de Monsieur Ducret*, 21 June 1957, FLC C3(1)456.

24. [“The tapestry of today [...] becomes the ‘mural’ of modern times. We have become nomads [...] this wall of wool that is tapestry can be taken down from the wall, rolled up, carried under one’s arm at will, hung elsewhere.”] Le Corbusier, “Tapisseries muralnomad,” *Zodiac* 7 (Milan, 1960), 56-65.

25. FLC C3 (1) 459.

**FIG. 3**  
Le Corbusier, *Trois femmes sur fond blanc*, 1950. Tapestry in wool, Atelier Picaud, Aubusson, 220 x 300 cm. FLC. Photo: C. Levitt.

26. Faux C, Lurçat à haute voix, Paris, Julliard, 1962, 63-64.

27. ["No one is excluded now, in these days of great jubilation, tapestry descends into the street..."] Jean Lurçat, *La tapisserie murale: méthodes et développement actuels*, communication à l'Académie des beaux-arts, Paris, 24 mars 1965, (Nemours: Éditions André Lesot, 1965), 5.

28. Éluard, "Liberté" (1942), *Oeuvres complètes* vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 1105-1107. See O'Mahony, "Renaissance and Resistance". For a detailed analysis of the impact of Popular Front politics on visual artists, see Pascal Ory, *La Belle Illusion: culture et politique sous le signe du Front populaire, 1935-1938* (Paris: Plon, 1994), esp. ch 5: 'Arts plastiques'.

29. Jean Lurçat, *La Tapisserie Française* (Seine-et-Oise: Bordas, 1947).

30. See McLeod, "Architecture or Revolution".

31. Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals were White: A Journey into the Country of Timid People*, trans. by FE Hyslop (London: Routledge, 1948), 168.

32. Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals were White*, 47. On Le Corbusier's admiration for the medieval model, see Sophie Bowness, *The presence of the Past: Art in France in the 1930s with Special Reference to Le Corbusier, Léger and Braque*, PhD thesis (London: Courtauld Institute of Art, 1996).

33. He wrote in 1923 that "Art is poetry", relating it to emotion and creativity. Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, trans. by John Goodman (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 249.

FIG. 4

Jean Lurçat, *Liberté* (Poem by Paul Éluard), 1943. Tapestry in wool, Atelier Goubely, Aubusson, 283 x 330 cm. Musée National de l'art moderne, Paris. Photo: © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Philippe Migeat. © Paul Éluard/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2020.

FIG. 5

Jean Lurçat, *Le Chant du monde*, 1957-66, panel 3, "Le Grand Charmier", 1959. Tapestry in wool, Atelier Tabard, Aubusson, 445 x 728 cm. Musée Jean Lurçat, Angers. Photo: Musées d'Angers, F. Baglin. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2020.

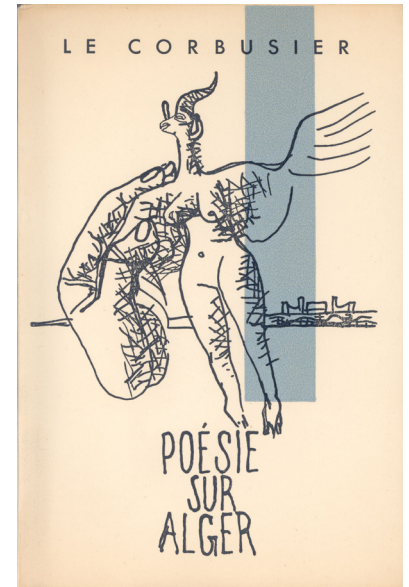
FIG. 6

Le Corbusier, *Poésie sur Alger* (Paris: Falaize, 1950). Front cover. FLC.



1914.<sup>26</sup> In a speech to the Académie des Beaux-Arts, he declared: "Personne n'est exclu puisque, les jours de grande liesse, les tentures descendent dans la rue."<sup>27</sup> This type of language relates to a Popular Front ideology and, for Lurçat, to the wartime Resistance. *Liberté*, woven in clandestine circumstances in the workshop of Suzanne Goubely in 1943, epitomises the descent of tapestry 'into the street' through its inclusion of stanzas from Paul Éluard's poem, famously reproduced as a Resistance pamphlet and dropped from the sky (Fig. 4).<sup>28</sup> As in Le Corbusier's *Trois femmes*, the prominence of the hand motif is telling here, relating imagery to ideology. Alongside the image of the cockerel (the emblem of revolutionary France) and the skulls (camouflaged as patterning), the torch-bearing fist is a clear symbol of a fight for freedom. It comes to stand for the tapestry itself: perhaps the most militant hands were those of the weavers who created it.

For both Le Corbusier and Lurçat, the revolutionary thrust of tapestry must be seen through the lens of medievalism. In Lurçat's book *La Tapisserie française*, he places himself at the pinnacle of a history that he traces back to the fourteenth century.<sup>29</sup> He endlessly exploited and reinvented the hallmarks of medieval tapestry, including a rich bestiary and *mille-feuille* patterning in his designs; and yet his tapestries are far from nostalgic. Lurçat's final project, the vast cycle *Le Chant du monde* (1957-66) is a case in point, intertwining biblical and apocalyptic imagery with the recent and topical horrors of Hiroshima (Fig. 5). The vivid colours against the black background stand out forcefully, asserting both the newness and immediacy of the tapestry (in contrast to the often-faded experience of viewing medieval examples) and rooting the cosmic significance of the events depicted uncomfortably within an innately French tradition. For Le Corbusier, medievalism was not so much an aesthetic consideration as an ideological one, linked to both collaboration and urban planning. In architecture, collaboration is necessary to realise design, but Le Corbusier saw it as admirable wherever it could increase efficiency, hence the appeal to him of the American models of Taylorism and Fordism.<sup>30</sup> It was in the American model, and especially in New York's skyscrapers, that Le Corbusier found a renewal of the spirit of the Middle Ages. In his *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches* (1934-1937), he condemns the individualist attitude that began with the renaissance as having "replaced the grandiose collectiveness of the Middle Ages" with its guild system, and praises the designers, engineers and builders of the modern city as modern craftsmen.<sup>31</sup> In the grid-format of American streets, he also found order that was lacking in contemporary Paris: "Your mind is free instead of being given over every minute to the complicated game imposed on it by the puzzle of our European cities."<sup>32</sup> Tapestry, with its underlying structure of warp and weft, might be understood as the ultimate grid, on the surface of which the artist's composition can freely wander, producing ambiguous and shifting imagery. The freedom of art was expressed variously by Le Corbusier in terms of both spirituality and poetry, both of which find resonance in his descriptions of skyscrapers and, surprisingly, in his urban plans.<sup>33</sup>



## Toward Poetry

Le Corbusier's *Poésie sur Alger* (1942, published 1950) is a poetic treatise which reflects, with a hint of irony, on his attempted reorganisation of the streets of Algiers in a series of rejected designs beginning with the *Plan Obus* (1933). He uses poetry and the poetic not literally, but as a metaphor for creating a system of streets for the city which, in his view, will help not only to enrich but also to create and define a social system and tradition: poetry, he writes, is “chef de file de l'économique et maîtresse du social” (economic leader and social mistress).<sup>34</sup> The title of his book is quite intentional in its suggestion of mapping poetry onto or over (*sur*) the city. The front cover depicts a winged female figure with a goat's head, clasped in a gesture of protection and support by an over-sized hand, floating over a diagrammatic sketch of a cityscape (Fig. 6). The same image can be found, oriented horizontally this time, in the 1949 mural painted on the curved wall of the Swiss Pavilion, where it is accompanied by the phrase “Garder mon aile dans ta main” (hold my wing in your hand), itself a quotation from Mallarmé, as Stanislaus von Moos has identified.<sup>35</sup> Within this complex web of referents, and in the rather sinister title of Le Corbusier's *Obus* (bombshell) plan for Algiers, the power relationships of both gender and race are called into question. We are reminded of the unstable racial identity of the *Trois femmes sur fond blanc*, which was also woven in inversion as *Trois femmes sur fond noir* (1948) and in which the horizontal figure resembles Le Corbusier's sketches of the self-styled cultural hybrid Josephine Baker. Maureen Shanahan posits the oriental *tapis* (rug or carpet) as the colonial 'other' of the French *tapisserie* (wall hanging), over which the European might literally and metaphorically walk.<sup>36</sup> As shown by his inclusion of the Berber rug in the 1925 Pavilion, Le Corbusier was interested in both types of woven object as sources.

In evoking poetry and the poetic as a means of understanding the imagery of Le Corbusier and Lurçat's tapestries, it is interesting to note the etymology of the word 'text', which derives from the Latin *textus* (a tissue or fabric) and which is in turn derived from *texere* (to weave). Writing is an act of weaving, and the fabric of the written word (its textual qualities) has been central to the self-referential production and analysis of literature in the twentieth century. The concept of textuality within the interdisciplinary discussion of visual and written works asserts the medium-specific qualities of word and image, allowing for a discussion of them on their own terms, even as it unites them.<sup>37</sup>

The panels of Lurçat's *Le Chant du monde* progress from destruction to glory; the penultimate panel (the last completed in Lurçat's lifetime) is titled *Poésie* (1961) (Fig. 7). Lurçat explained that the figure to the left represented a Sagittarius, a symbol of the poet: “c'est la flèche qui pique droit au but” (the arrow that flies straight

34. Le Corbusier, *Poésie sur Alger* (Paris: Falaize, 1950), 10.

35. Stanislaus von Moos, *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis* (1969) (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2009), 286. For more on the Swiss Pavilion mural, see Jérôme Liniger et al, *Le mural Le Corbusier 1948-1998* (Paris: Fondation Suisse, 1998).

36. Pertinently, Shanahan notes that it is Léger's signature which defines his tapestries' orientation and so claims them as tapisseries rather than tapis. Shanahan, “Tapis/Tapisserie”, 237.

37. See Stephen Melville, Bill Readings (eds.), *Vision and Textuality* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).



to the point) and “celui qui tape dans le mille” (he who scores a bullseye).<sup>38</sup> Poetry, through its poignant combinations of imagery and symbols is able, for Lurçat, to articulate more clearly than any other form of expression the heart of an issue. In *Poésie*, the poet-archer organises the zodiacal system: his words, it seems, give him celestial power. In expressing poetry in this way, Lurçat picks up on the economy of language as a unique characteristic of poetry versus prose.

When Lurçat incorporates Éluard's words into the woven surface of *Liberté*, he literally creates fabric from them and engages with the poem's own shifts between different forms of expression, encapsulated in the pun on which it revolves: writing (*j'écris*) as a form of shout (*je crie*). The tapestry, and by extension the wall on which it is hung, becomes yet another surface in the poem's list of possible sites for expression. The woven words are suspended within the tapestry's ground, alongside shadowy visual symbols and together, they stand for and describe the images of the particular stanzas selected by Lurçat: glittering shapes, resonant colours, the foam of clouds and the sweat of the storm. They are the very material of a “physical truth” in the form of the tapestry as tangible and tactile object. Lurçat's inclusion of text cuts “straight to the point” of the visual imagery. A second version of *Liberté*, woven in 1952 (Fig. 8), exchanges the torch-bearing hand for the more biblically-loaded image of the serpent, perhaps a peace-time warning against complacency - evil continues to lurk beneath the surface. In his own collection of poems, a bestiary published as part of *Mes Domaines* in 1958, Lurçat describes the serpent as “insinuant comme le gel, tortueux comme la femme avide”.<sup>39</sup> The seemingly simple displacement of the hand by the serpent also suggests a new layer of symbolism for some of the other images; the cockerel is no longer just the symbol of France, but the harbinger of betrayal in the crucifixion narrative and the eclipse format of the sun may recall the darkening of the sky at Christ's death. Such slippages and elisions are characteristic of poetic writing, and so to find them in the visuality of the tapestry neatly unites the two disciplines, even as it complicates meaning.

38. Jean Lurçat, “Lurçat commente le chant du monde”, in *Jean Lurçat: Le Chant du monde d'Angers* (Angers: Musée Jean Lurçat, n.d.), n.p.

39. [“insinuating like the frost, and devious as a greedy woman”]. Jean Lurçat, *Mes Domaines* (Ahun: Verso, 2004), 38. Lurçat's appropriation of the bestiary recalls Guillaume Apollinaire's *Le Bestiaire ou cortège d'Orphée* (1911). Orpheus, the poet musician, is evoked in Lurçat's tapestry *Armoire d'Orphée* (1946).

**FIG. 7**  
Jean Lurçat, *Le Chant du monde*, 1957-66, panel 9, ‘La Poésie’, 1961. Tapestry in wool, Atelier Tabard, Aubusson, 440 x 1040 cm. Musée Jean Lurçat, Angers. Photo: Musées d'Angers, F. Baglin. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2020.

**FIG. 8**  
Jean Lurçat, *Liberté* (Poem by Paul Éluard), 1952. Tapestry in wool, Atelier Picaud, Aubusson, 283 x 364 cm. Musée Jean Lurçat, Angers. Photo: Musées d'Angers, F. Baglin. © Paul Éluard/ ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2020.



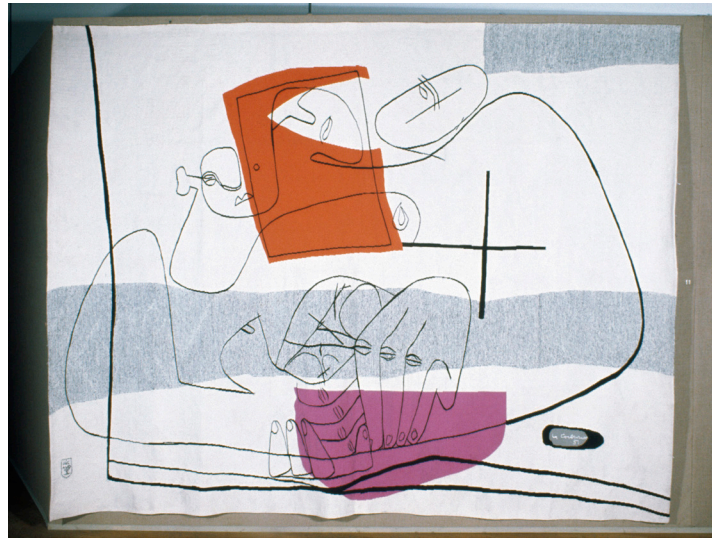
Le Corbusier never incorporated actual phrases into his tapestries as he had into the Swiss Pavilion mural, although poetic references and visual quotations abound, not least from elsewhere in his iconography. His *Poème de l'angle droit* (1955) brings many of these together.<sup>40</sup> In *Les Mains* (1951) (Fig. 9), three figures are joined by the central motif, that recurring image of hands, clasped around each other with fingers and palms intermingled. The two coloured planes seem to be loosely recognisable as a door and a bowl. Eyes, lips, knuckles, and a teardrop shape in the centre echo each other across the composition. The prominent cross shape lends the whole image an ecclesiastical air, perhaps referencing the joining of hands in a marriage ceremony, or the Holy Trinity (readings which are not mutually exclusive). The teardrop form could stand for either a flame (the visual representation of God's presence through the Spirit) or a wound (the sacrifice of Christ); the bowl may hold the water of baptism or the wine of the sacrament; and the door may imply the space of a church interior or the image of Christ as door.

However the cross is also a right angle, and can be directly compared with a plate from the final section (G3) of the *Poème de l'angle droit* (Fig. 10), accompanied by the following text: "With carbon / we have / traced the right angle / the sign / It is the answer and the guide / the fact / an answer / a choice / It is simple and naked / yet knowable / The savants will talk / of relativity and rigour / But conscience / makes it a sign / It is the answer and the guide / the fact / my answer / my choice."<sup>41</sup> The hand, resolutely drawing a right angle in charcoal, might be seen as the hand of the architect himself. The mathematical symbols included at the bottom reinforce the scientific and logical basis of architectural engineering; they also recall the ideograms that Le Corbusier sometimes used in letters and postcards to friends. The right angle of the addition symbol seems to be a marker of equality or unity against the innately hierarchical 'greater than' symbol next to it; as such, it might even relate to Le Corbusier's evocation of medieval collaboration. However the printed handwriting of the text and the characteristically sketchy draftsmanship of the plate undercut the stability and exactitude of architec-

40. On the signs and symbols of the *Poème*, see for example Richard Moore, "Alchemical and Mythical Themes in the Poem of the Right Angle", *Oppositions* 19 (Cambridge: MIT Press, Winter 1980), 110-114.

41. Le Corbusier, *Le Poème de l'Angle droit* (1955) trans. by Kenneth Hylton in *Le Corbusier and the Architecture of Reinvention* (London: Architectural Association, 2003), 58-97.





**FIG. 9**  
Le Corbusier, *Les Mains*,  
1951. Wool tapestry, Atelier  
Picaud, Aubusson, 220 x  
280 cm. FLC.



**FIG. 10**  
Le Corbusier, *Le Poème de  
l'angle droit*, Paris: Éditions  
Tériade, 1955. 'Il est la  
réponse et le guide', section  
G.3: Outil, plate151. FLC.

ture and indeed of rationalism: there is no perfect 90-degree angle in sight. The grammar of the accompanying stanza of poetry reinforces the issue, oscillating between definite article, indefinite article and possessive pronoun. By the final line, the right angle has become subjective and personal.

The elusive imagery of the tapestries, and in particular of *Les Mains*, is left unanchored by Le Corbusier's poetic works. The resultant ambiguities, deliberately unresolved, relate Le Corbusier to surrealism. Amidst the slippages already noted, the ecclesiastical reading might be replaced by a more sexual one (the wound of Christ by the female 'wound'), the combination of which is subversive, but characteristic in the work of surrealist protagonists such as André Masson or Georges Bataille.<sup>42</sup> Whilst he never adopted surrealism's basic tenets, analyses of Le Corbusier's work in recent years have brought him closer to the movement than previously allowed: the notion of poetry or poetics, I argue, is one of a variety of means of understanding and articulating this.<sup>43</sup> For Lurçat, the value of surrealism lies in both its poetic and political potential. He intentionally quotes stanzas by revolutionary surrealist writers - Éluard as discussed here and, elsewhere, Robert Desnos.<sup>44</sup> He employs typically Bretonian surrealist devices such as metamorphosis and juxtaposition in both his tapestries and his paintings and, in the blackened sun of *Liberté*, for example, resplendent with skulls, we might once again glimpse an implied reference to Bataille - the "Soleil pourri" (rotten sun) this time being the destabilising undercurrent layered beneath Éluard's words and the biblical eclipse suggested earlier.<sup>45</sup>

## Epilogue: Finality?

Hung behind his coffin in 1965, *Les Dés sont jetés* epitomises the ambiguities of Le Corbusier's poetic approach to art. Like all of his Muralnomad tapestries, it was produced in a series of six; the one that hung behind his coffin was the édition *d'auteur*, kept by Le Corbusier himself (Fig. 11). Various attempts have been made to 'claim' the imagery of the tapestry, whether directly or indirectly. One of the remaining five examples has an interesting provenance, having been purchased in 1960 by the architect of the Sydney Opera House, Jorn Utzon, and hung in his Danish home. Following Utzon's death, it was purchased by the Sydney Opera House in 2015. It has been unclear as to whether it was intended to hang in the Opera House from the beginning, Utzon having been forced to withdraw from the project and the interiors having been completed by Peter Hall. Architectural historian Antony Moulis makes a claim for the tapestry as a commission, providing an explanation of the forms within it as relating to the shape of Sydney Harbour and Bennelong Point, complete with the small triangular yellow form of a sailboat bobbing around at the top centre.<sup>46</sup> In fact it seems more likely that Utzon simply purchased the piece as an exemplar and that had the Opera House commission gone ahead, it would have involved some larger site-specific tapestries.<sup>47</sup> Far from making clear reference to Sydney harbour, the imagery of the tapestry is ambiguous.

There is an important connection between Le Corbusier's mural painting and his tapestries in terms of both concept and content, and Le Corbusier was almost certainly thinking back, at this late point in his career, to the murals he had painted in 1939 on the walls of Eileen Gray's villa *E-1027* in Roquebrune Cap-Martin (1929), above which he would build his own *Cabanon* in 1952 and where he would end his days in the water below. Similar shapes to those in *Les Dés sont jetés* appear in the mural on the wall of the guest bedroom (Fig. 12). In this context, ambiguous and even opposing suggestions for source material come into play. As Tim Benton has pointed out in his recent analysis of the murals during their renovation, the form on the left of the mural (and by extension the tapestry) refers to the marrowbone that counted amongst Le Corbusier's *objets à réaction poétique*, and which he filmed with his movie camera in 1936, whilst the mask-like shape on the right, which Moulis reads as Bennelong point in the tapestry, is derived from a characteristically striated pebble that Le Corbusier found on the beach at Roquebrune.<sup>48</sup> These poetically-charged objects, enlarged and highly coloured on the wall of *E-1027*, are placed into what Le Corbusier termed "constant conversation".<sup>49</sup> If they are anthropomorphised, however, they are also potentially gendered - the marrowbone extended by a flaccid phallic form, more prominent when it is reworked in the tapestry than in the mural, and the pebble-mask by the plaited hair-like motifs to the right, which disappear in the tapestry. Beatriz Colomina has previously read gender into the murals at *E-1027* via biography, assuming the figures in a different mural, below the pilotis, to be Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici - a reading which Benton convincingly discounts, as he does Colomina's analysis of the murals as a whole in terms of a colonialist invasion of Gray's space because of their supposed relationship to sketches of Algerian women.<sup>50</sup>

42. On Le Corbusier and Bataille, see Nadir Lahiji, "The gift of the Open Hand: Le Corbusier reading Georges Bataille's *La Part Maudite*," *Journal of Architectural Education*, 50:1 (Sept 1996), 50-67.

43. See for example: Dagmar Motycka Weston "Le Corbusier and the restorative fragment at the Swiss Pavilion", in *Tracing Modernity: Manifestations of the Modern in Architecture and the City*, ed. by Mari Hvattum and Christian Hermansen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 173-328. Also: Juan José Lahuerta, "'Surrealist Poetics' in the work of Le Corbusier?", in *Le Corbusier: The Art of Architecture*, ed. by Alexander von Vegesack (Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, 2007), 325-345.

44. See, for example, Lurçat's tapestry *Hommage aux morts de la résistance et de la déportation* (1954).

45. Georges Bataille, "Soleil pourri", *Documents* 3 (1930), 173-4.

46. Antony Moulis, "For Sydney: On Utzon, Le Corbusier and Art for the Sydney Opera House", in *Imaginations: Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ) Annual Conference*, 27 (Newcastle, NSW: SAHANZ, 2010), 290-295.

47. See the correspondence between Utzon and Le Corbusier from 1958 to 1964: FLC R3(5)244-274 and 326-371. The tapestry is one of a number of artworks that Utzon purchases from Le Corbusier.

48. Tim Benton, *Le Corbusier peintre a Cap Martin* (Paris: Editions du Patrimoine, 2015), 71. The original pebble was discovered by Arthur Ruegg and shown in the exhibition *Mon Univers* (Zürich: Pavillon Le Corbusier, 2019).

49. Le Corbusier, "Objets à réaction poétique", in *Le Corbusier lui-même*, ed. by Jean Petit (Geneva: Éditions Rousseau, 1970) 178.

Attempting to anchor the shifting imagery of *Les Dés sont jetés* to specific biographical moments is unstable at best. Le Corbusier's continual reuse and reinvention of symbols and motifs means that the tapestry contains layers of referents and meanings that must be interpreted by looking at ideas that recur across his career. The purist fluted glass, which reappears at the bottom edge of the composition alongside the dice of the title, is a case in point. The dice themselves, then, are perhaps the most unstable image of all, and they bring us full circle to Le Corbusier's place as painter and poet. Again, these simple everyday objects could be ascribed various meanings. They might, for instance, refer to those thrown by the soldiers at the base of the cross in the crucifixion narrative - a motif which Picasso notably includes in his 1930 *Crucifixion*, the bulbous, melting forms, enlarged symbolic objects and brash colours of which bear more than a passing resemblance to the guest bedroom mural at *E-1027*. Picasso is another important source and comparator, Le Corbusier's artistic output having stood in constant relation and opposition to his since *Après le cubisme* (1918).<sup>51</sup>

50. See Beatriz Colomina, "War on Architecture: E.1027", in *Assemblage* 20 (1993), 28-29 and Tim Benton, "E-1027 and the Drôle de Guerre", in *AA Files* 74 (2017), 123-143.

Colomina's argument is based in part on Stanislaus von Moos, "Les femmes d'Alger", in *Le Corbusier et la Méditerranée* ed. by Danièle Pauly (Marseille: Parenthèse, 1987), 191-209.

51. Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) was notably reproduced as a tapestry in 1955 and hung at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

However as we have seen, Le Corbusier rooted himself consciously not only within the artistic avant-garde, but also the literary and it is to Mallarmé once more that he seems to refer with the tapestry's title. *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1897), the quintessential textual and non-linear poem so revered by poets and artists of the early 20th century, has often suffered, like Le Corbusier's tapestries, from being only partially read - as an experiment in form and medium, but not imagery. It is the headline phrase that Le Corbusier seems to reference, and he could not have known how pertinent the poem's shipwreck imagery, cited in brief at the start of this paper, might become in the context of the tapestry's use as the backdrop to his coffin. However he might well, in referencing natural forms like the marrowbone and pebble, have considered Mallarmé's evocative description of things "caressed and smoothed and rendered / supple by the wave". Le Corbusier's tapestries, like his career, are far from linear in their meanings. The playful sailboat in *Les Dés sont jetés* seems to float on the surface of the woven composition, as free as the associations which might tie the tapestry's motifs variously to Sydney, Roquebrune, Algeria, Golgotha or Paris. The title may be read as an image of finality and no



**FIG. 11**  
Le Corbusier, *Les Dés sont jetés*, 1960. Wool tapestry, Atelier Pinton, Felletin, 218 cm x 355 cm. FLC.

return - the dice are cast. And yet the throw of dice is also a catalyst, and the tapestry has made for a useful launchpad for a discussion of Le Corbusier's lifelong game-plan, which - contrary perhaps to popular belief - did not "abolish chance" or ambiguity as an element of creativity.

Lurçat and Le Corbusier are linked, then, not simply by their roles in the revival of tapestry production in Aubusson, but also through their use of poetry within their woven works - Lurçat through the inclusion of actual stanzas of poetry and Le Corbusier through the more encrypted references, metaphors and elisions which he understood in terms of the poetic. If Lurçat takes medievalism out of time and applies it via the poetry of his day to the specifics of the Second World War and the Resistance, Le Corbusier, in being deliberately enigmatic, employs the metaphor of poetry to defy site-specificity in his *Muralnomads* and thus retain their portability.

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**FIG. 12**  
Le Corbusier, *Mural on the wall of the guest bedroom, E-1027, Roquebrune Cap-Martin, 1939.*