



AUBUSSON WEAVES TOLKIEN

The fantasy world of J.R.R. Tolkien
to be woven as Aubusson tapestries



Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves



THE ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

The Cité internationale de la tapisserie in Aubusson, France, has signed an agreement with the Tolkien Estate for creating an exclusive series of thirteen tapestries and one carpet to be woven at Aubusson over the course of four years. The creations will be based on the original illustrative works produced by J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973), who began painting and drawing as a child, and continued to do so all through his life.

Christopher Tolkien, the son of The Lord of the Rings author J.R.R. Tolkien, has put a lot of work and effort throughout his life into honouring and promoting his father's monumental work in all its richness, and as literary executor, he notably edited and published the Silmarillion manuscript.

In 2010, the Scientific and Cultural Project for the museum at the heart of the nascent Cité internationale de la tapisserie was drafted by the curator, and he came up with the idea for The Nave of Tapestries. The question arose of what it would be like to create a 20th century wall hanging based on a renowned literary work, as was the custom in the 16th or 17th century. J.R.R. Tolkien's stories seemed an obvious choice for this. A young apprentice weaver, Thomas Mondon, began drafting a document listing all the different illustrators of Tolkien's written works, including the author himself. In 2012, an interview with Christopher Tolkien in the French newspaper Le Monde provided the team from the Cité de la tapisserie with a breakthrough: the project should honour the memory and illustrative works of J.R.R. Tolkien himself.

At the end of 2012, the director of the Cité internationale de la tapisserie, Emmanuel Gérard, contacted Dominique Bourgois, publisher of the French version of The Lord of the Rings (Christian Bourgois publishing house) in France, and emphasised the relevance of weaving the illustrative works of J.R.R. Tolkien that accompanied his novels, in the Aubusson tapestry tradition. The sheer size of the work would invite visitors to immerse themselves in the fantasy world of J.R.R. Tolkien as never before. The publisher was taken with this idea, as was most of the Tolkien family subsequently.

At the end of 2013, Christopher and Baillie Tolkien received the Cité's director, Emmanuel Gérard, and curator, Bruno Ythier, at their house in Haute-Provence. They said that aside from an exhibition of Tolkien's

original pictures by the Bodleian Library in Oxford, it was the first time that anyone had expressed a wish to showcase the illustrative work of their father and father-in-law. They asserted that in their eyes, the idea of using tapestry to present this illustrative work was perfect. 14 drawings and watercolours by J.R.R. Tolkien were jointly selected by the Tolkien family and the Cité de la tapisserie as subjects for tapestries or carpets. This then led to negotiations with the Tolkien Estate's lawyer, Cathleen Blackburn. At the end of 2016, this resulted in an agreement signed by Christopher Tolkien for the Tolkien Estate, and French senator Jean-Jacques Lozach for the Cité internationale de la tapisserie. In 2020, the Tolkien family wished to complete the hanging. Two additional graphic works by J. R. R. Tolkien were selected to be woven.

Timeline for the 'Aubusson weaves Tolkien' project

- End of 2013: meeting with Christopher and Baillie Tolkien, start of negotiations;
- End of 2016: agreement signed with the Tolkien Estate;
- 25 January 2017: official launch of the project and start of the digitisation process for the 14 original works at the Bodleian Library in Oxford;
- Spring of 2017: the weaving committee establishes the technical aspects (colour sampling, size of tapestries, selection of weaving thickness, etc.), work is carried out on the first tapestry cartoon (real-size painted paper-board model);
- Summer 2017: presentation of the project and the first cartoon in a reconstructed cartoon-making workshop;
- Autumn 2017: weaving starts and progress can be followed at the Cité de la tapisserie;
- 6 April 2018: projected date for the first 'tombée de métier' (the tapestry is cut from the loom);
- 2020: Addition by the Tolkien family of two original works;
- 2023: weaving comes to an end, presentation of the entire tapestry work.



REUNITING WITH THE TRADITION OF GREAT NARRATIVE WALL HANGINGS

This project came to light after much thought on the form a large tapestry wall-hanging with a literary narrative would take today. The name of J.R.R. Tolkien quickly came to the fore as author of one of the greatest literary sagas of the 20th century.

The project is structured around four series, each linked to different works by the author: Letters from Father Christmas (a collection of letters written and illustrated by J.R.R. Tolkien for his children between 1920 and 1942), *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and finally, *The Silmarillion* (a work published posthumously in 1977 by J.R.R. Tolkien's son, Christopher Tolkien), which traces the first Ages of Middle-earth – the setting for his novels. 14 mural tapestries will be created. The fifteenth and sixteenth pieces, the Numenorean Carpet and Middle-earth map, are woven floors; covering of about 130 square metres. This will take months of meticulous work in the French tapestry-crafting manufactures and workshops of Aubusson and the Creuse that specialise in the very same Aubusson tapestry techniques recognised by UNESCO, and added to the lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009.

Such a large project showcasing this major aspect of the author's work has never been seen before. Using Aubusson tapestry craftsmanship to weave this series of 16 pieces based on the illustrative works of J.R.R. Tolkien is very innovative in the world of tapestry today. It creates a link to the great narrative wall-hangings (series of tapestries illustrating the different parts of a story) of the 17th and 18th centuries that made reference to important literary texts (Homer's *Odyssey*, or *Renaud and Armide* taken from Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, etc.). This direct link to literature was lost in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Today, in the 21st century, this project of weaving the illustrative works of J.R.R. Tolkien has an added originality: it benefits from illustrations created by the author of the literary works himself, which is a first in the history of great narrative wall hangings.

Every due respect will be given to the original works as the Cité de la tapisserie embarks on this heritage-based adventure of combining Aubusson tapestry, a major decorative art, with the illustrative works of J.R.R. Tolkien

that are so suited to becoming history-in-the-making tapestries, embedded as they are in a 'present-day mythology'. The sheer monumentality of this woven wall-hanging project will invite viewers to immerse themselves in the fantasy world of J.R.R. Tolkien as never before. In the wake of Charles Le Brun's *L'Histoire d'Alexandre* (*The History of Alexander*) or Isaac Moillon's *L'Odyssee d'Ulysse* (*Ulysses' Odyssey*), it is now the illustrative and narrative universe of J.R.R. Tolkien that will live on through the ages alongside his books.

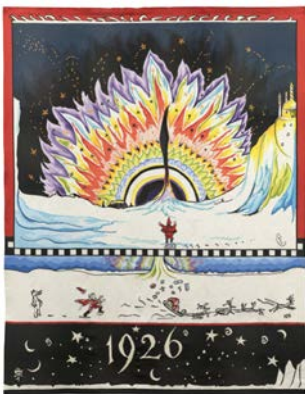


J.R.R. Tolkien, *Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-Elves*, *The Hobbit*, chap. IX, 1937. Watercolour on paper. One of the five watercolour paintings by the author for the first American edition of *The Hobbit*. © The Tolkien Estate Limited 1937.



16 ORIGINAL ARTWORKS

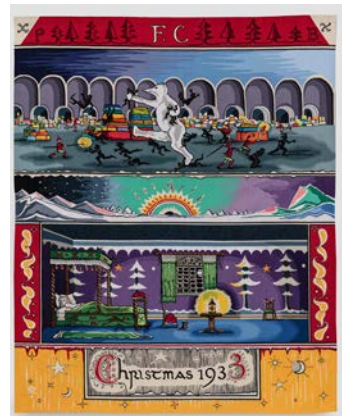
The Father Christmas Letters



Christmas 1926,
adapted from The Father
Christmas Letters



Christmas 1928,
adapted from The Father
Christmas Letters



Christmas 1933,
adapted from The Father
Christmas Letters

The Hobbit



The Trolls,
adapted from the Hobbit



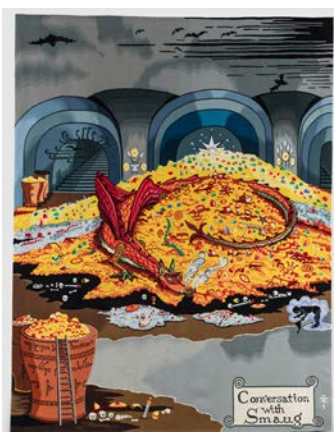
Rivendell,
adapted from the Hobbit



*Bilbo woke up with the Early
Sun in His Eyes,*
adapted from the Hobbit



*Bilbo comes to the
Huts of the
Raft-elves,*
adapted from the
Hobbit



*Conversation with
Smaug,*
adapted from
the Hobbit



The Silmarillion



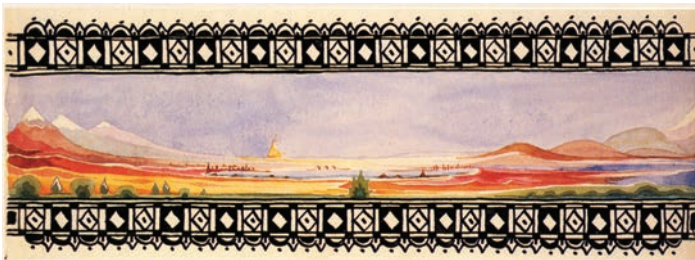
Halls of Manwë - Taniquetil,
adapted from the
Silmarillion



Númenórean Carpet,
adapted from
the Silmarillion



Glorund sets forth to seek Túrin,
adapted from the Silmarillion



Mithrim,
adapted from the
Silmarillion



Beleg finds Findling in Taur-na-Fuin,
adapted from the
Silmarillion

The Lord of the Ring



Map of Middle-earth,
adapted from The Lord of the Rings



Moria gate,
adapted from The Lord of the
Rings

Roverandom



*The Gardens of the Merking's
Palaces,*
adapted from Roverandom



TOLKIEN THE ILLUSTRATOR

By Jean-François Luneau,

lecturer and researcher in the History of Art at the University of Clermont-Auvergne in France

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) is not only the author we all know, but he was also a talented illustrator. Many of his writings published when he was alive are accompanied by his illustrations.

As of 1920, Tolkien got into the habit of sending his children a letter signed by Father Christmas himself every year. These letters were accompanied by one or more wonderfully detailed illustrations that depicted the story told by Father Christmas. In 1926, he illustrated the Northern lights in the Land of Father Christmas. Two years later, he depicted a Clumsy Polar Bear helping Father Christmas prepare the Presents. In 1933, he wrote and illustrated the story telling of Father Christmas quietly sleeping in his newly decorated bedroom, while his loyal polar bear, helped by red elves, chased the goblins who invaded the cave where the presents were being prepared.

J.R.R. Tolkien also invented the story *Roverandom* for his children. It recounts the adventures of a little dog, Rover, who is turned into a toy for annoying a magician. *The Gardens of the Water King's Palace* illustrates Rover's adventures, which take him from the Moon to the bottom of the sea, in search of the magician who will restore him to his animal form.

This child-friendly art is obviously not the most famous of Tolkien's works: we are more familiar with his stories set in Middle-earth. Drawing on the influence of epic poems from Anglo-Saxon literature (such as *Beowulf*), the Icelandic or Norwegian Sagas, the Icelandic Eddas collection, the Finnish Kalevala or certain William Morris novels, Tolkien creates a fantasy world within the fertile setting of Middle-earth, which recalls the fertile setting of Brittany.

It is here, in this setting, teeming with figures and myths, that Tolkien brings his characters to life. In the same way that you pull on a yarn of wool to undo the ball, Tolkien unravels their stories, even if it means returning to the initial skein and adding to it to tie it in with the great finished novels such as *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*.

Several of Tolkien's illustrations accompany the birth

and growth of Middle-earth, depicting its geographical originality. The works that refer to different episodes are also a pretext for presenting the landscapes. The Halls of Manwë on the Mountains of the World above Faërie, drawn in 1928, represents Taniquetil, the High Shining White Peak dominating the Pelóri mountains, those towering mountainous defences that protect the Eastern borders of Valinor, country of the Valar. The mansion of the first Valar, Manwë, is perched on its summit where he reigns with his wife, Varda. The Taniquetil is certainly one of those 'mountains seen far away, never to be climbed' that Tolkien evokes in one of the letters to his son Christopher (Letter 96). *Beleg finds Flinding in Taur-na-Fuin* illustrates the forest of Fangorn where the archer Beleg, on a quest to find his friend Túrin, discovers the Elf Flinding, who has escaped from the mines of Morgoth, Sauron's master.

Beleriand, on the Western edge of Middle-earth, is where the events of the First Age take place. Lake Mithrim is situated in North Beleriand, in Hithlum. It is here, on the shores of the lake, that Fëanor wins the second battle against the armies of Morgoth, also called the Battle under the Stars. *Glaurung sets forth to seek Túrin* is one of the final episodes of *The Lay of the Children of Húrin*, written between 1918 and 1925, which ends in the death of the dragon Glaurung and the suicide of Túrin. This first dragon created by Morgoth, a fallen Valar, is as feared for the fire he breathes as for the bewitching words he speaks and his hypnotic lidless eyes.

Beleriand disappears at the end of the First Age, submerged after the fall of Morgoth and the ensuing cataclysm. The fate of Númenor Island, on the west side of the World, between Valinor and Middle-earth, is no better. It is a kingdom founded by men that sinks into the sea at the end of the Second Age. In the Third Age, its past splendour is but a memory, just like the *Númenorian Carpet*, where the geometrical perfection of the



The technical committee establishing the dimensions and the weaving constraints of the future tapestries.
© Cité internationale de la tapisserie.

shape reflects the kingdom at its birth.

Tolkien provided illustrations for *The Hobbit*, a novel published in 1937, from the very first editions. Sometimes the drawings were in black and white, like *The Trolls*, whose air of stupidity disappears against a dark forest background magnified by the monochrome effect. As with some of the works mentioned above, the human characters often blend into a spectacular landscape. *Rivendell and its Last Homely House* evokes the scenery of the Swiss Alps. In *Bilbo Woke Up with the Early Sun in His Eyes* and *Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves*, the majesty of the landscapes eclipses the figures of Bilbo asleep, or of the dwarves as burlesque victors perched on barrels. Lastly, in *Conversation with Smaug*, a dragon with a keen sense of smell and as talkative as he is dangerous, Tolkien chose the moment when Bilbo greets him: 'Oh Smaug the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities'.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, an epic novel published in 1954-55 that follows on from *The Hobbit* and explains why the elves left Middle-earth at the end of the Third Age, we select *Moria gate*, which stands in the way of the heroes as they try to enter Moria, a Dwarves' kingdom. As for *Map of Middle-earth*, it helps us to understand that Middle-earth, situated between the oceans, resembles our own Europe, transposed into an imagi-

nary past.

Tolkien's rich Middle-earth setting provided him with the substance to weave long narratives and create several texts – a name also given to fabrics according to a multimillennial metaphor. And now, Tolkien's illustrations will be woven into a tapestry wall-hanging. Whether they be epic or comic in nature, or just simple landscapes, Tolkien's illustrations are ideal for being transposed into tapestry. As we cannot visit the palace of Théoden in Edoras, whose walls are adorned with tapestries narrating the deeds of the ancestor of the Rohan knights, Eorl the Young, we can at least admire the woven memory of Tolkien's fantasy world.



Technical blueprinting of the first tapestry of the future wall-hanging. © Cité internationale de la tapisserie.



A GROUND-BREAKING ADAPTATION

The starting point for this Tolkien wall hanging is a collection of original watercolours and drawings made by the famous author, kept at the Bodleian Library in Oxford and most of which do not measure more than 20 cm on any edge. It takes every bit of Aubusson expertise to successfully transpose these small formats into a woven work of several metres square, while honouring the original works. Our pledge: to create a wall-hanging in the spirit of the time when the illustrations were created.

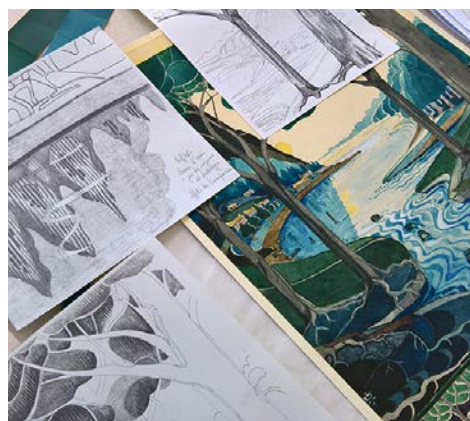
The first stage consists of establishing the final formats of each tapestry, their technical blueprints and the range of wool colours used, with the aim of creating a harmonious wall-hanging while also honouring the original works.

The next stage is creating the 'tapestry cartoons' (painted plaster-board models) scaled to the real size of the future tapestries and that serve as a guide to the hand weavers during weaving. Bruno Ythier, curator of the Cité internationale de la tapisserie, gives an overview of this transposing technique: "It is Aubusson know-how that dates back to more than five hundred years ago. It is the work of the cartoon painter, who transposes the work. And it is not just a case of enlarging the work as the weavers point out with this anecdote: 'You start with a tiny rose on the picture, and if you thoughtlessly enlarge it, you end up with a cabbage.' The enlarged illustration needs to be reworked bit by bit to restore the spirit of the original. A whole range of technical parameters need to be taken into account, especially the properties of the wool itself. Wool absorbs light, which implies that colours must be as saturated as possible when the wool is dyed to obtain colours that are as vibrant in the woven fabric as in the original works."

Once each illustration has been digitalised in high resolution, and with a view to creating enlarged versions, a weaving committee comprising cartoon painter Delphine Mangeret, who will be transposing all the works onto the cartoons, the curator of the Cité de la tapisserie and the head weaver, René Duché, was created in Spring 2017 to think about all the production constraints imposed on the weavers working on the project. The weaving workshops will be selected after submitting samples of work.

The first cartoon, which sets the tone for entire wall hanging, is currently being prepared by cartoon painter Delphine Mangeret. This piece was chosen as the graphic standard for the wall hanging as a whole because of its very tapestry-like nature and its similarities with works created within the National School of Decorative Art in Aubusson in the 1930s. The weaving committee was inspired to opt for a return to past traditions promoted by the School at that time through bold colours and a very specific technical draft influenced by 15th and 16th century tapestry work, and rarely in use today.

The cartoon of the Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-Elves illustration will be guiding the first woven work in autumn 2017. The workshop in charge of the weaving will be creating the tapestry work in the Cité's workshop where an eight-metre-long loom is made available to weavers for large-scale orders.



Preparatory work before transposing the illustration onto the cartoon.
© Cité internationale de la tapisserie.

Selecting the wool colours using gouache paint samples to establish the formulas for the dyer.
© Cité internationale de la tapisserie.

