

The Wall Street Journal : 'A 16th Century Vision of Fantasy in Modern Paris', by Kristiano Ang, September 9th, 2015

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LIFE

A 16th-Century Vision of Fantasy in Modern Paris

Sculptor Johan Creten explains how a Renaissance-era tapestry inspires him



Artist Johan Creten in his Paris studio with his 16th century tapestry. PHOTO: EMMANUEL FRADIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By KRISTIANO ANG

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Johan Creten's bronze and clay sculptures have been exhibited everywhere from the Pompidou Centre in Paris to galleries in the U.S. and Belgium. However, the pride of the Belgian artist's personal collection isn't a ceramic piece. It's a 16th-century tapestry that has shuffled between continents, but remains forever Flanders.

The tapestry, which Mr. Creten says he acquired for nearly \$40,000 in 2014, was crafted out of wool in the Flemish city of Oudenaarde around 1550. It depicts an enchanted forest, with birds, unicorns and snails peeking out of the forested backdrop. Mr. Creten says such tapestries were the best way Renaissance Europe had to visualize fantasies.

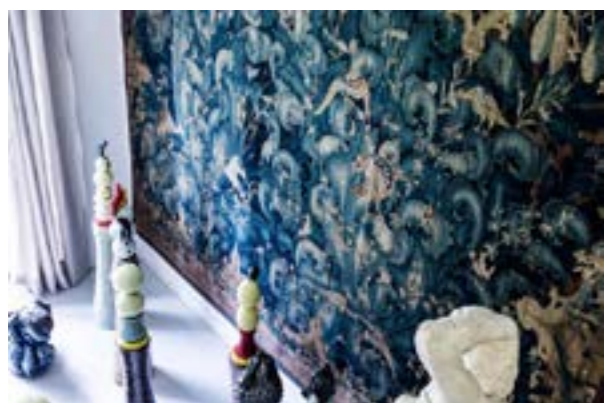
"You'd arrive in your castle and see a series of tapestries hung on the four walls and would suddenly be in the middle of a jungle, in a green dream or nightmare," he says.



The wool tapestry, crafted around 1550 in the Flemish city of Oudenaarde, depicts an enchanted forest with birds, unicorns and snails. PHOTO: EMMANUEL FRADIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

To avoid exposing the tapestry to too much light, Mr. Creten, who has lived in Paris for over a decade, stores it in his studio overlooking a canal in Paris's 19th arrondissement. He calls the two-story space his *trou de souris*, or mouse hole. "Most of the time I'm by myself there," he says. "It's a damned romantic space." After he purchased the tapestry, he added more curtains to the windows to make the studio even darker.

Escapism has long fascinated the 52-year-old Mr. Creten. He grew up in Hoegaarden and Tienen, Belgian towns that he calls culturally barren, before befriending an antique-dealing couple as a teenager and hanging out with them.



The tapestry is light-sensitive and huge, 130 inches high by 174 inches wide. PHOTO: EMMANUEL FRADIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"They taught me that the only way you could really go deep into art was by living with art," he says. "You have to hold it, touch it, have it next to your bed and see it in the morning when you wake up."

That in part explains why he became a sculptor, though he trained as a painter at art school before traveling and working in studios from the Netherlands to Mexico for years at a time. Today, Mr. Creten may be best known for popularizing the use of clay, his signature material in sculpture. His latest show, "God is a Stranger," opens at New York's Galerie Perrotin on Sept. 9.

Antique tapestries only recently came within Mr. Creten's financial reach. "Two generations ago, they were considered top prizes, but because they're light-sensitive and huge, nobody wants to take care of them any longer," he says.

His tapestry, which is 130 inches high and 174 inches wide, "doesn't fit in a normal New York apartment, for sure," he says. Nonetheless, he recently bought another, similar piece in July.

Mr. Creten says that he feels a certain connection with the provenance of the Oudenaarde tapestry: He casts his bronze sculptures in the same city where it was made.

"The object itself is so strong and has so much inherent value and power that people throughout the ages have taken the energy and money to take care of it," says Mr. Creten, who adds that he drew inspiration for his own artwork from the longevity of the tapestry.

"It's wonderful to see how it has survived from one generation to the next."