



a history of creativity

After writing several books on textile design and production, Irene Waller's eighth title gives a fascinating account of life as a working designer and artist in the latter half of the 20th century

'MISS CARTER, YOU WILL DO embroidery and weaving.' These were the words that closed the doors of the painting school. At the same time they opened up a life filled with a diversity of textile activities to a young woman about to commence her third year of study at art school in the late 1940s.

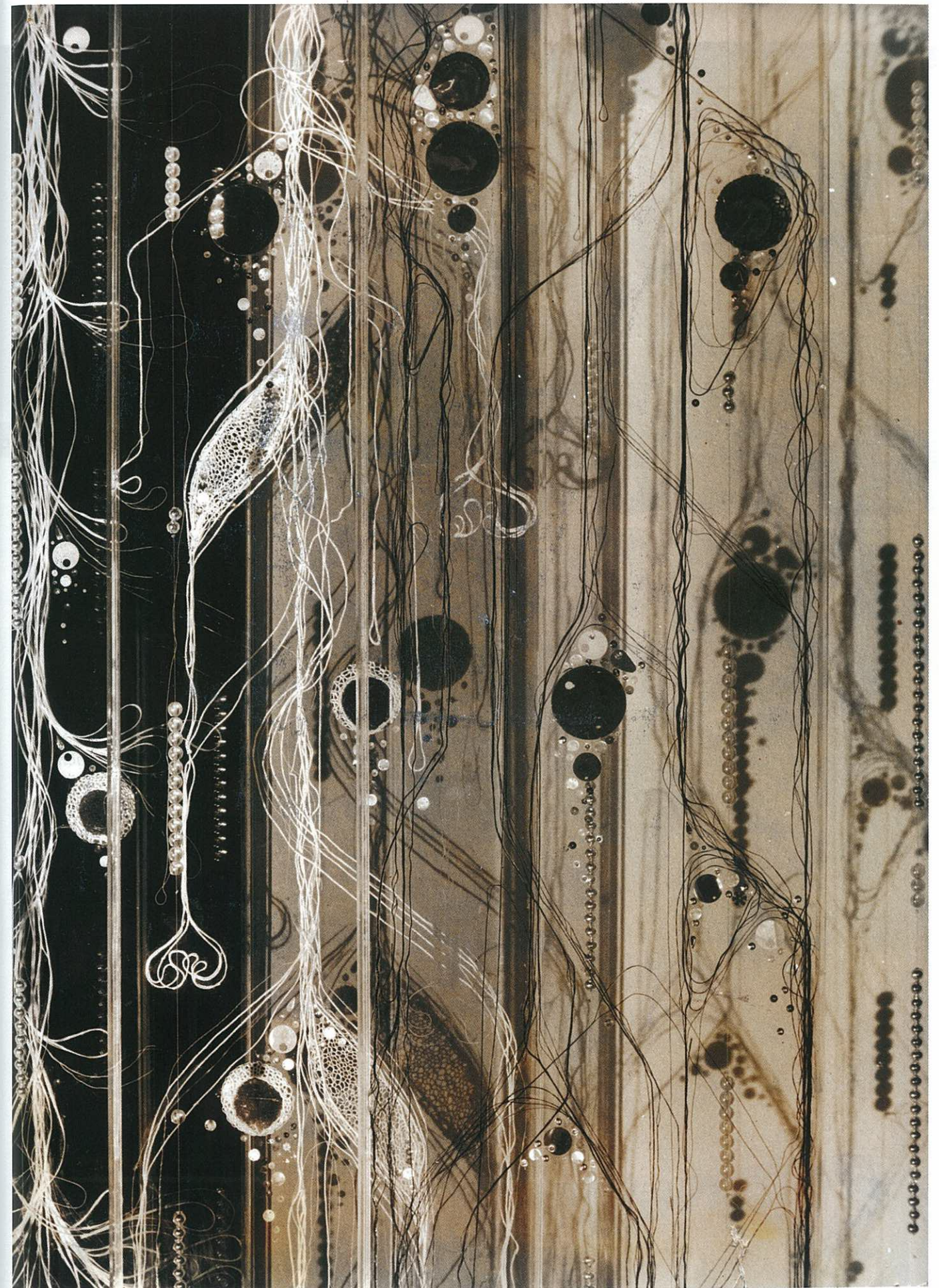
Irene Waller (née Carter) was later to head the Department of Constructed Textiles at Birmingham College of Art and her passionate advocacy of an informed, supportive and encouraging system of textile education is witnessed not only by her many years of teaching and lecturing, but also by the seven 'how to' books she wrote on topics that included knots and netting, tatting and weaving.

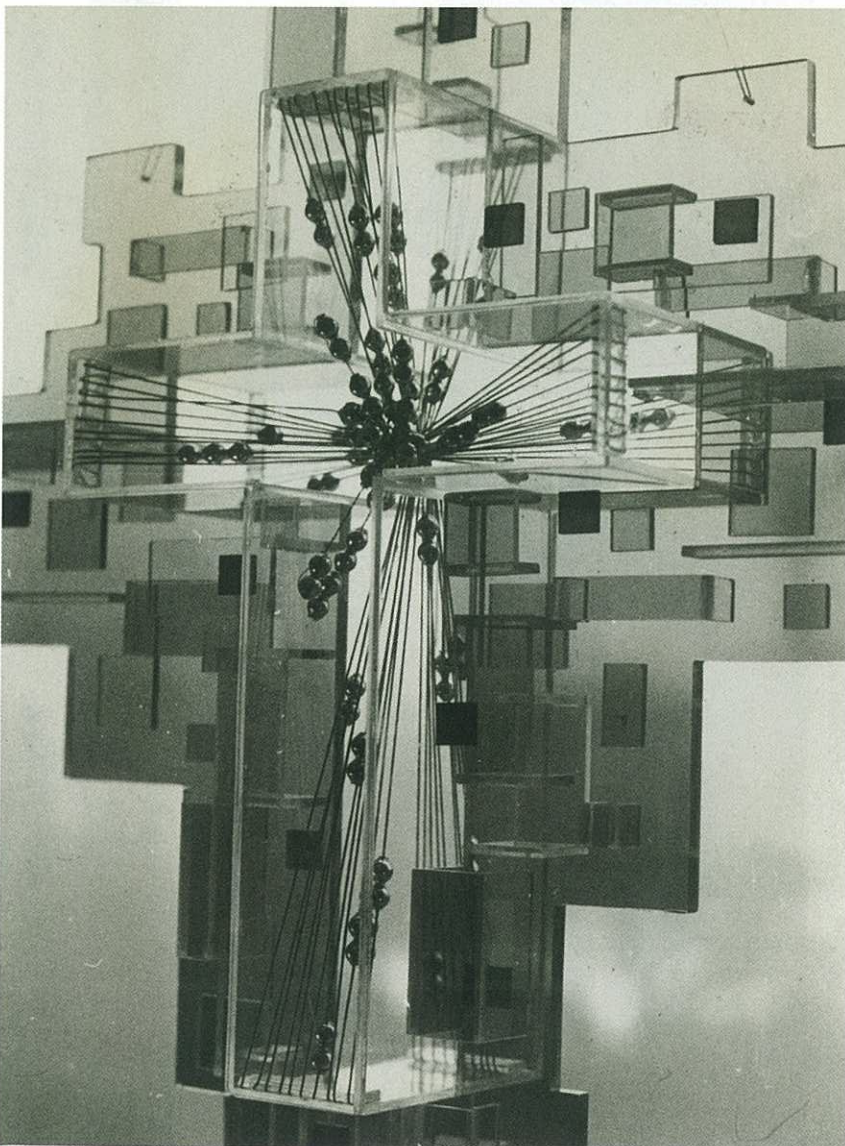
Having been assigned to the so-called 'women's crafts', Waller comments that the delight characterising the preceding two years of general art studies started fading, not because of the subjects themselves, but as a result of how weaving and embroidery were required to be taught. Although the latter 'was carried on in a more congenial atmosphere than weaving' she remembers how the 'stylised figure, sharp-angled, abstract shapes era of the late 40s' which typified much of the contemporary embroidery did not encourage a passionate response in the teenaged needlewoman. Nevertheless, she achieved National Diplomas in Design with distinctions in both the crafts, which were to play so significant a role in her life.

The influence of Scandinavian design in the applied arts was extremely vigorous in the middle decades of the 20th century, and a study visit to Sweden in 1947 was a revelatory experience for Waller. There she made first-hand acquaintance with natural-dyed textiles in spinning and weaving centres, so very different from the

Irene Waller at work on a mural for the New Community Church, Weloeey Castle

Right: Irene Waller, detail of wallhanging for the exhibition at the Edinburgh Festival 1970. Threads between Perspex sheets





This page, top: This photograph from an article in *Design* magazine in 1964 shows (l-r) Nuno Vegas, Irene Waller and Mary Wills

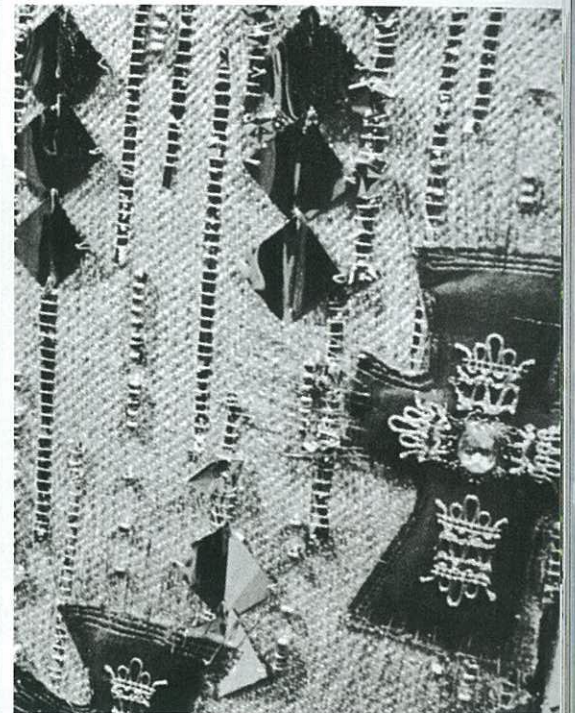
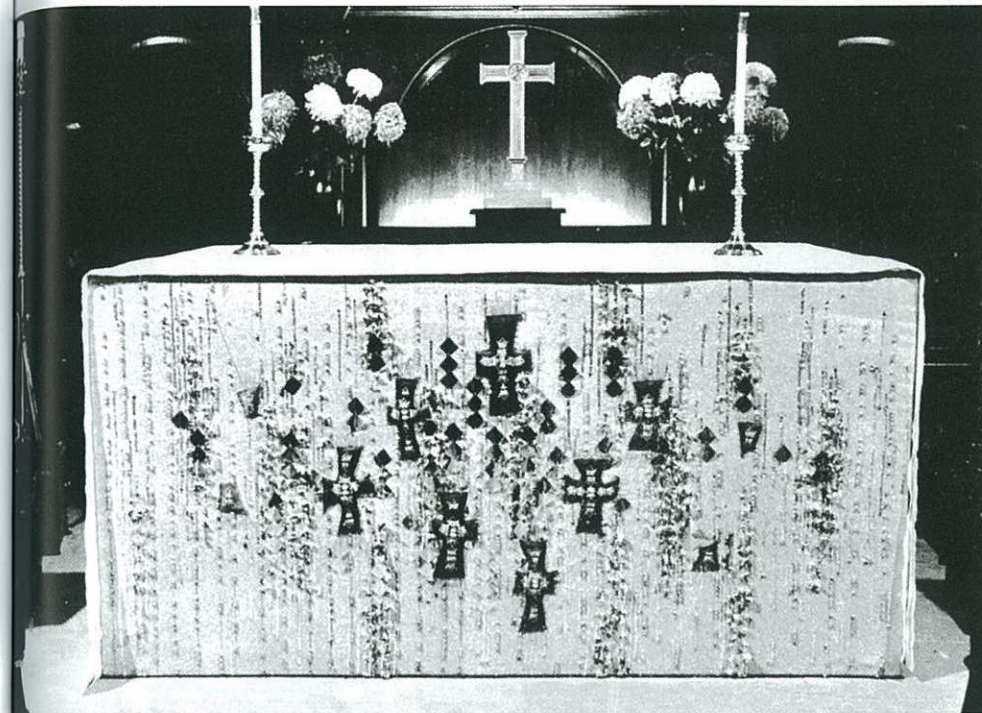
Below: Irene Waller, Free Hanging Cross in Perspex and thread for Harrietsham Church

Opposite: Irene Waller's hand woven and embroidered altar frontal in gold for the 13th century church of St Peter, Kinver and detail, right

derivative versions which 'had, been copied ad infinitum in drab colours' in post-war Britain. Her mentor did not set her to work at a loom but supplied 'sketchbooks, folders and sample-snipping scissors' and instructed her to investigate anything she found appealing – an unrestrictive approach that Waller embraced.

Art Matters & The Materials Workshop, Waller's most recent publication, recounts a life in which textile related pursuits have been central and is especially interesting as a record, not only of the difficulties faced by women of her generation in the fields of education and employment but also of her involvement with the fibre art movement. Interviewing the 86-year-old Waller is a fascinating experience, akin to having access to a living and immensely knowledgeable archive of textile history of the latter half of the 20th century. Particularly intriguing are her stories recounting how, travelling in a caravan with her husband and three young children (the eldest of whom is now artist Carole Waller) she visited the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennials, which were to exert a tremendous world-wide influence.

When the first of these expositions was held in 1962, tapestry was thought of as being primarily wall-hung, and it was stipulated that submissions had to have a minimum surface area of 12 square metres. It is with real exhilaration in her voice that Waller



tells of her initial encounters with the sculptural woven works of Magdalena Abakanowicz from Poland and the Croatian-born Jagoda Bui. She was overwhelmed by a sense of being in the presence of weavings, which not only liberated this art form from the attitudes of earlier years, but were also harbingers of the exciting future opening up for the fibre arts.

It was Waller's former embroidery instructor who suggested that she take over the weaving department at Birmingham College of Art. Although she had no intention of becoming a teacher, she nevertheless went to look at the set-up and was duly shown 'a gloomy room full of dusty looms'.

Despite this unprepossessing beginning, Waller decided to accept the position, and loved the years she spent there. It was the new ideas and sense of innovation she witnessed in Lausanne that became 'the mainspring of what I and my students were doing'.

Then in the early 1970s, a Scottish jam-maker, a town-crier, a Benedictine abbot from the renowned pottery at Prinknash monastery and Irene Waller were sent to America to demonstrate their skills as part of a promotional tour for British goods. When the weaver was asked, 'do you ever teach?' her positive answer resulted in more than 20 visits to America, where she taught courses at textile and weaving guilds.

In the same period Waller made television appearances on the BBC

crafts programme *Serendipity*, discussed the 17th and 18th century embroideries of Arbury Hall in Northampton in another series and demonstrated and talked about machine embroidery and knotting on *Mastercraftsman* and disarmingly explains that 'neither the teacher nor the extrovert in me could resist the glamour'.

Amongst the many commissions that this active maker has undertaken, many have been for churches, and the reminiscences are many. She recalls the awful moment when, late at night and extremely tired, she spilled tomato ketchup over 'an ivory and gold-silk embroidered altar frontal' she was stitching.

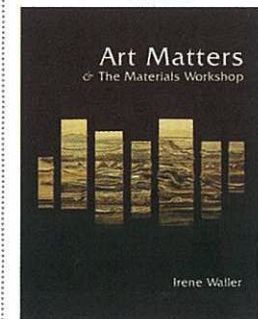
Creating an altar cloth for the Norman church of St Peters Kinver in Staffordshire posed particular problems as the sanctuary was dark with a very heavy altar rail obscuring much of the altar, and a huge stained-glass window above, which meant that the frontal would be competing against powerful elements. Waller felt it needed brilliance in order to hold its own and so used a weave and embroidery technique with an encrusted gold textile, which she enhanced with an appliqué of cross-motifs executed in simulated jewels, braids and velvets. Three hanging panels for a London church were formed by embroidering, weaving and interlacing skeins of yarn and crushed

fabrics into a base of chicken wire from which three-dimensional shapes could be formed.

Waller was clearly relishing no longer doing, 'what I had so dogmatically been taught', while at art school, and the inspiration she found in Lausanne was working like a yeast which enlivened and extended her creative practice.

Despite the frustrations, which have occurred in the course of her life, Irene Waller says with conviction that 'I am a fortunate person,' and she attributes much of this to having found such fulfilment through her long and passionate involvement with the fibre arts and textiles. ●

IAN WILSON



Art Matters & The Materials Workshop by Irene Waller is published by Malvern: Aspect Design (2014) £24.50 www.aspect-design.net