

Hillu Liebelt - Tapestry Weaver

Three Dimensional Weavings by a master of the art

Hillu Liebelt was born in Trier, Germany, in 1959 but from 1980 has been a resident of London. Following her basic training she has worked as a tapestry weaver since 1990, introducing fresh and exciting techniques and ideas to the art.

Hillu's favourite materials are mercerised cotton, spun rayon and rayon filament, silk and linen. Other materials, including wire of different strengths and rigidity, created new possibilities as the flat woven pieces could be moulded, adding some three-dimensionality to pieces.

In a further development stage, rigid wire frameworks helped create abstract textile structures on different planes. One series of such pieces, the shields, were inspired by the great variety of battle and dance shields displayed at masquerades and other ceremonial occasions throughout the world. For these structures Hillu also used patinated brass foil and aluminium sheets.

BUT WHAT IS 'TAPESTRY'?

Magazines, including *Workbox*, have from time to time featured tapestry weaving and have given accounts of its historical development. Hillu Liebelt has studied the ancient art of tapestry weaving and was fully aware of its place in textile history when taking it up and subsequently developing it as a contemporary art form.

The word "tapestry" is derived from the Greek 'tapis' and the Latin



Above. "Chora II". Made in 1995 this is a woven tapestry.

'tapetium', always meaning a woven structure, not to be confused with any form of stitchwork.

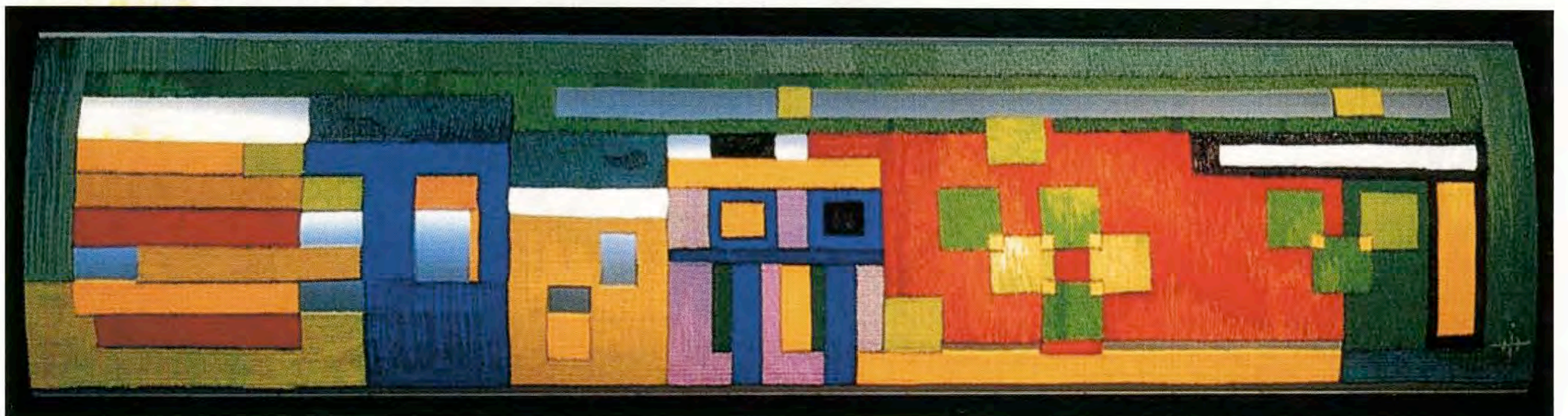
Traditionally, most larger tapestries were manufactured on commission in large workshops using designs from well-known artists. Until recently very few of the artists who made the designs actually wove their own tapestries.

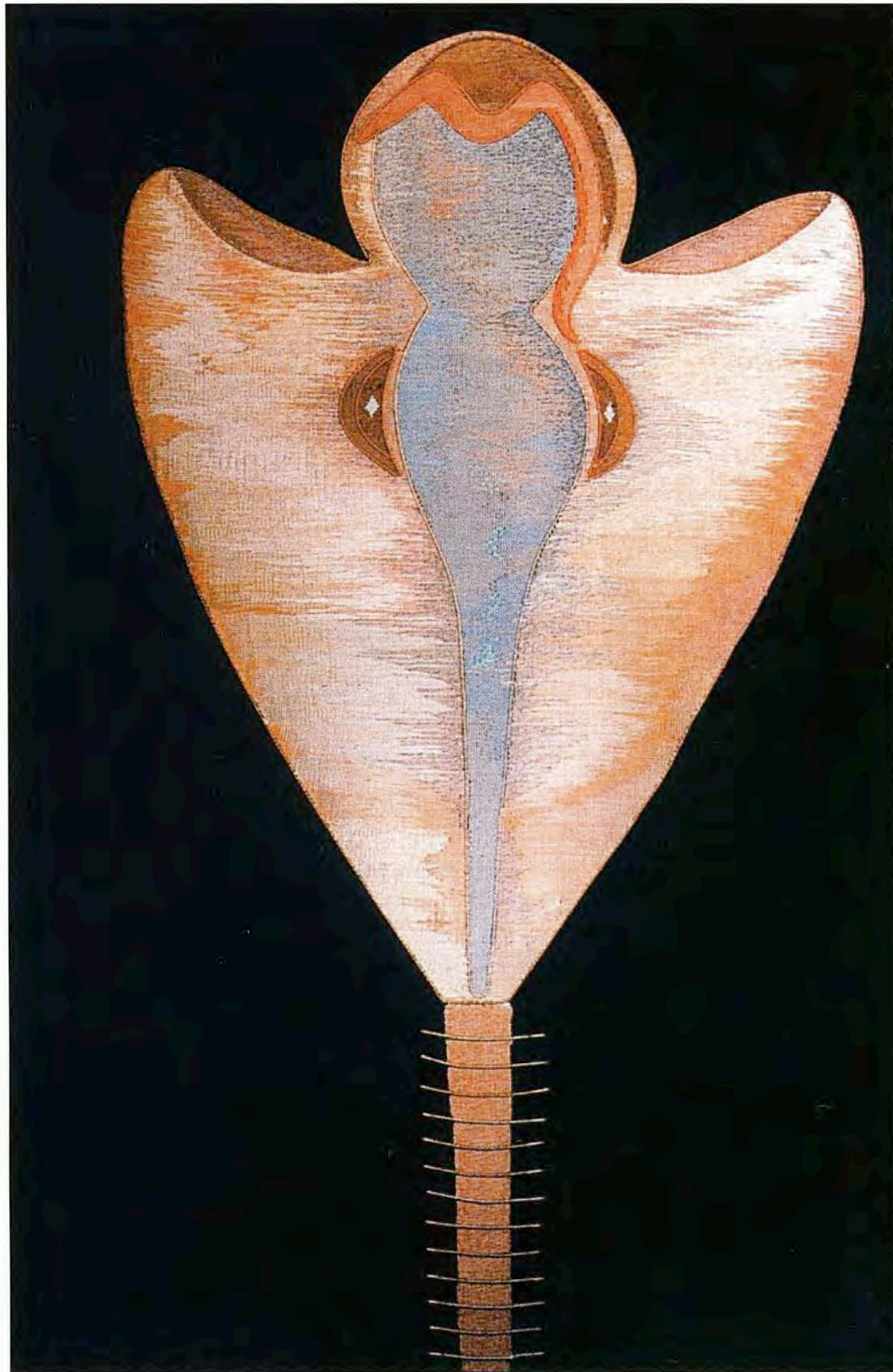
William Morris in England and Jean

Lurçat in France (the latter in the 1930s) helped to free the art of tapestry weaving from its imitative role (imitating paintings). Nowadays more and more tapestry weavers are working from their own designs.

Tapestry is a handweaving technique that requires only the simplest of looms - any frame that can hold a number of warp threads. The weft (crosswise) threads are

Below. "Im Spaetrot". Made in 2001, the piece measures 30 x 125 x 5cm and the materials are cotton and rayon over aluminium. The title literally means "in the late red".





Left. "Graugestalt hellflueglech. Made in 2000 and measuring 147 x 77 x 7cm, the materials are rayon, cotton and wire. The design was inspired by a mask in the British Museum. It is the type an African boy would wear for his tribal initiation. The words are difficult to translate but literally mean a grey figure with light wings.

Below. "Mood I". Made in 1998, a detail is shown here. The measurements are 55 x 30 x 5cm and the materials are linen, rayon and cotton on a metal structure.

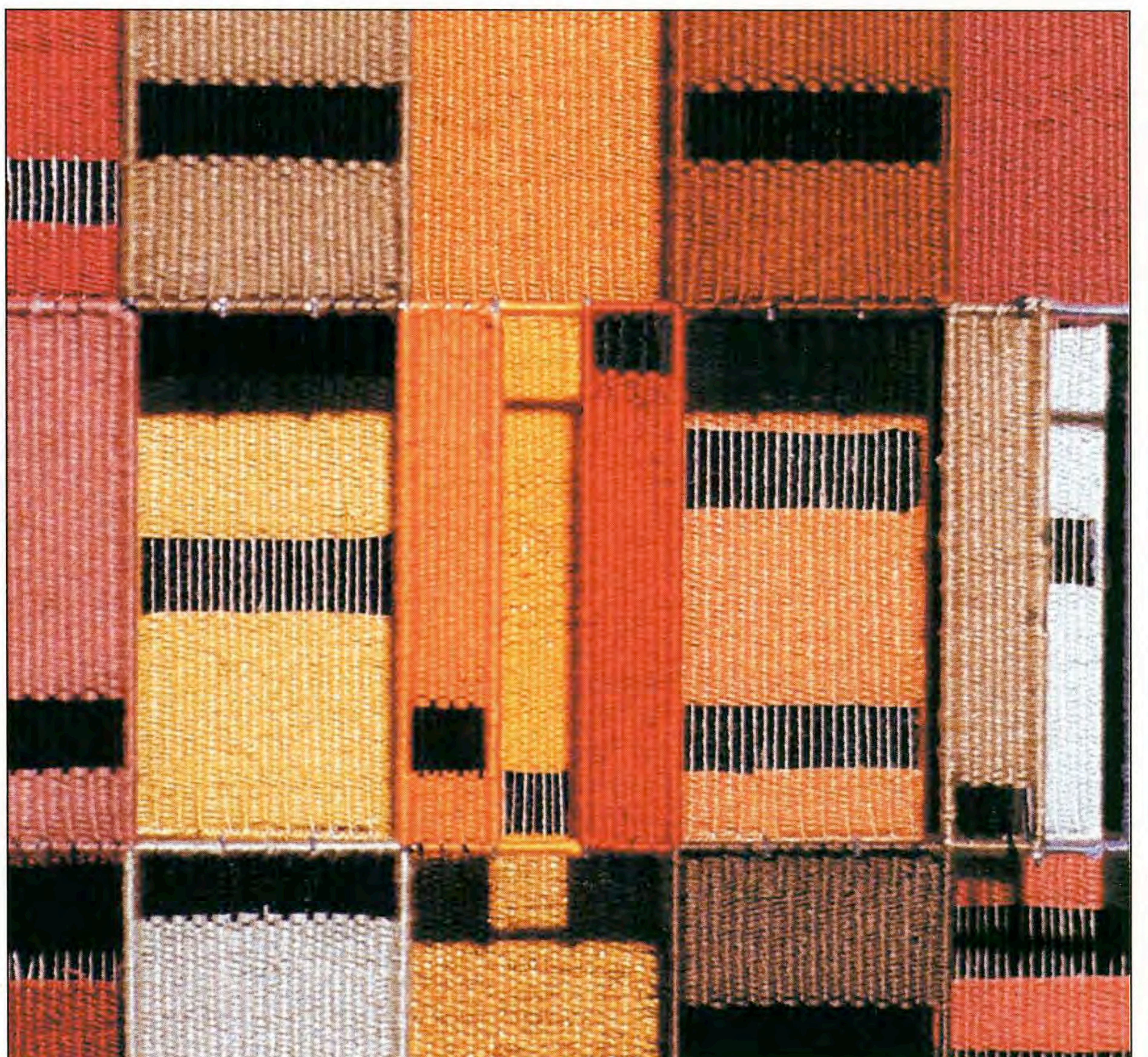
woven into the warp in plain weave which means the weft thread passes over one warp and under the next.

Being a "weft-faced weave", tapestry weaving completely covers the warp threads to create a smooth flat surface. The weft can be woven using bobbins, butterflies or needles but always by hand.

Remnants indicate that tapestries were woven as early as 3000BC and the techniques have been little changed since then. In Europe, tapestries were mostly designed by artists who painted the designs to their full size for professional weavers to use as patterns. The weaving was done mostly in wool, though silk and gold threads were sometimes added.

It is not surprising from this beginning that tapestries resembled paintings in appearance with the use of many colours and techniques that produced very fine work. Although the basic techniques have changed little over the centuries, there have been changes in style, imagery and texture and it has been recognised as fine art form since the 1400s.

Contemporary tapestries no longer copy art. The weaver is usually the designer. The original purpose of



tapestry, to add decoration and warmth to a residence, now extends to restfulness and texture in our lives - "... a kind of textured poetry." (Nancy Harvey: "Tapestry Weaving").

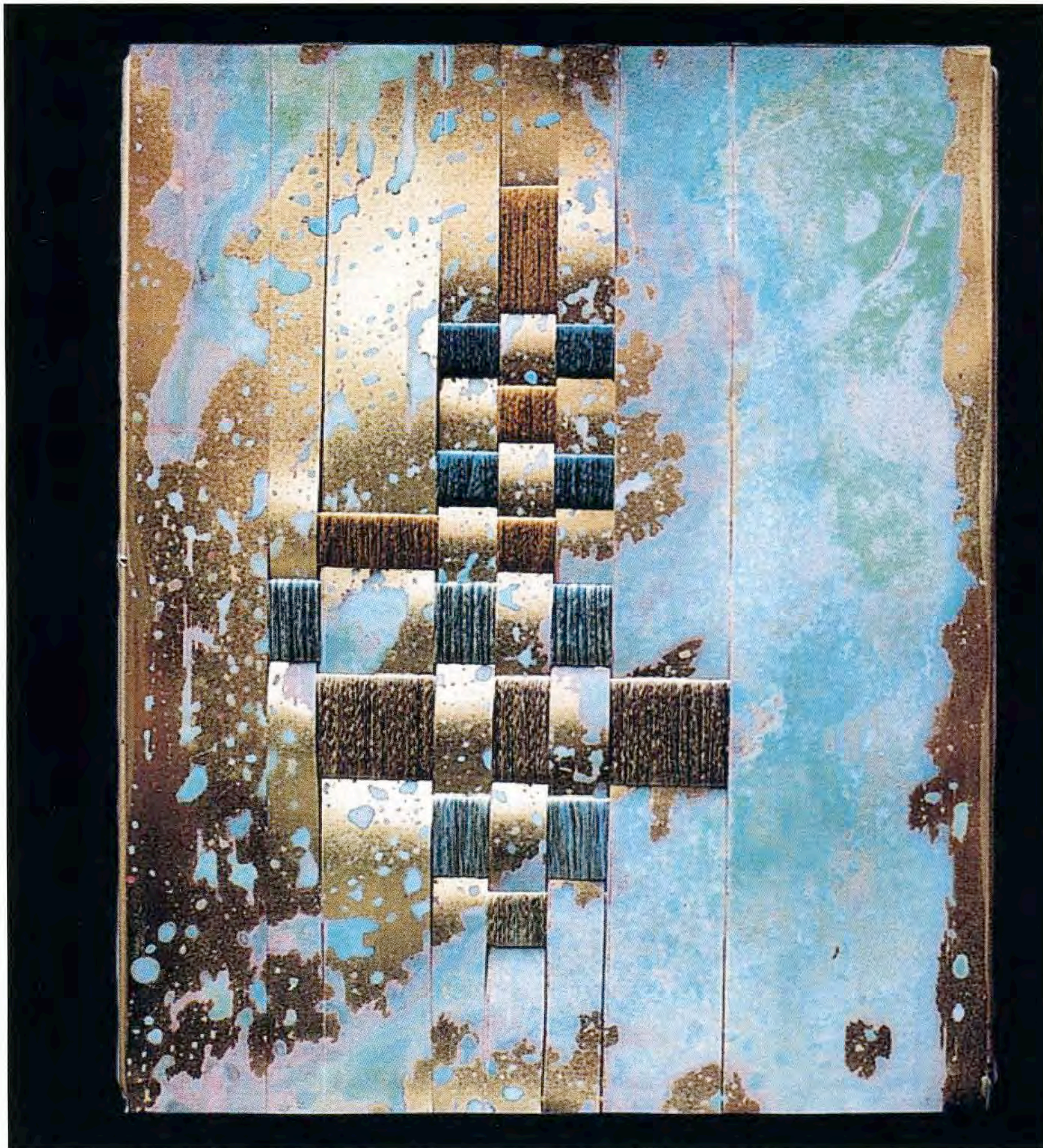
A MIRROR ON SOCIETY

F.P. Thomson, in his book "TAPESTRY Mirror of Society", states that tapestry has been called "the elegant art" and the "mirror of civilization". He feels that it should be called the "mirror of society". The origins of weaving go back 400,000 years to the time that our ancestors were learning to make tools.

In the English speaking world the last six hundred years have seen names for tapestry that include: arras, arrass, arrazi, arres, aubusson, Flemish drapery, gobelin, hanging, taeped, taeped, tapeccery, teped, tapesry, tapesserie, tapetion, tapetium, tapis, tapisery, tapisserie, tapisery, tapestry, tapistrye and tapstry.

William Morris gave his personal view of tapestry in what has become a classical definition:

"It may be looked upon as a mosaic of pieces of colour made up of dyed threads, and is capable of producing wall ornament of any degree of elaboration within the proper limits of duly considered decorative work. As in all wall decoration, the first thing to be considered in the designing of it is the force, purity and elegance of the silhouette of the objects represented and nothing vague or indeterminate is admissible. Depth of tone, richness of



inch and thousands of colours. Morris reduced the warps to twelve per inch and used only about thirty colours.

In 1976 the tapestry studio at West Dean in West Sussex was established, producing mainly translations of works by the great masters. The original main source and inspiration was Henry Moore and the project lasted eleven years. The West Dean Tapestry Studio now produces contemporary works of a continuing and pro-active high standard.

THE LAUSANNE BIENNALE

In the forward march of tapestry weaving development British workshops have not been working in isolation. By the 1960s and the 1970s a cross-fertilisation was taking place, largely through the Lausanne Biennale.

The French tapestry weaver and tapestry artist Jean Lurçat had for some time wanted to hold an international exhibition of contemporary tapestry works. Plans were formulated jointly with Pierre Pauli, and in 1961, under the Presidency of Lurçat, The International Centre for Ancient and Modern Tapestry was established in Lausanne. In 1962 it mounted the first Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie. Exhibits had to be no less than five metres square. Most of the pieces in this first Biennale were produced in workshops but later Biennales maintained the mural scale

colour, and exquisite gradation of tints are easily to be obtained in tapestry; and it also demands that crispness and abundance of beautiful details which was the especial characteristic of fully developed Mediaeval Art."

Thus, William Morris harkens back to the pre-Raphaelite ethic of purity and the perfection of Mediaeval Art. His role in tapestry weaving revival shows us the true William Morris. After visiting the Royal Windsor Tapestry Manufactory, set up in Windsor in 1876, and visiting also the Gobelin premises in Paris, he expressed the sentiment that both workshops were "prostituting the potentials of the art".

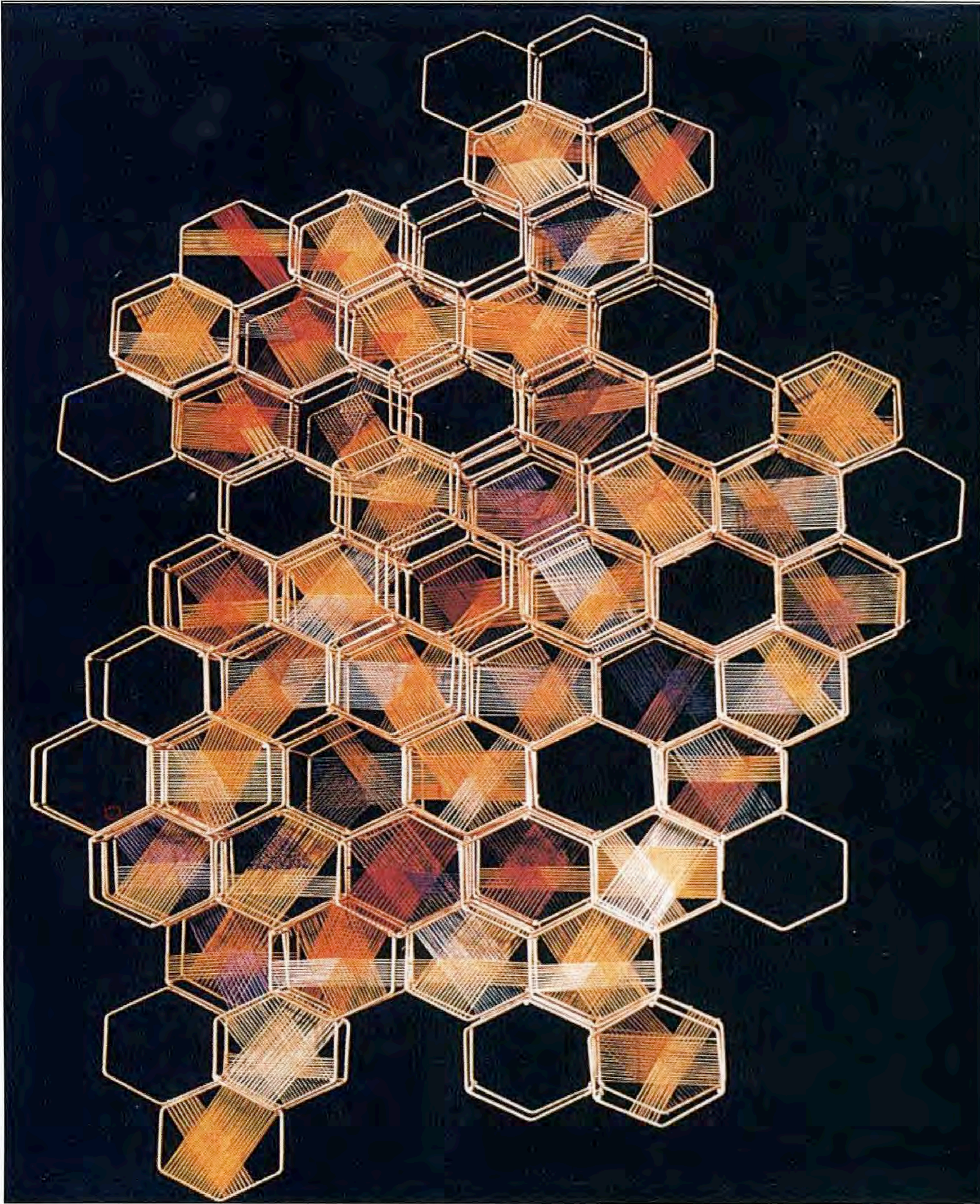
Morris set up his Merton Abbey workshops in 1881 and they operated until 1940. His principles for the art were somewhat Gothic: "... when tapestries were designed and woven as hangings, with simple colours, and little more perspective than would be permissible in a stained glass window".

Morris was introducing a major twentieth century concern, namely, the relationship between painting and tapestry and the corresponding relationship between the tapestry weaver and the artist. He abhorred the French view that tapestry copies painting. Gobelin used between twenty-five and forty warps to the

Above: "Without Title XII". Made in 1999, this piece measures 18 x 13 x 4cm and is made from patinated brass foil and rayon. In this amazing work the woven threads both complement and contrast with the background.



Right: "Helma". Made in 1996, the dimensions are 63 x 50 x 12cm and the materials are rayon, cotton and wire. This was inspired by a Celtic helmet in the British Museum.



Above. "Honeycomb". This amazing structure was made in 1998 and measures 110 x 72 x 22cm. The materials are rayon threads over a metal structure.

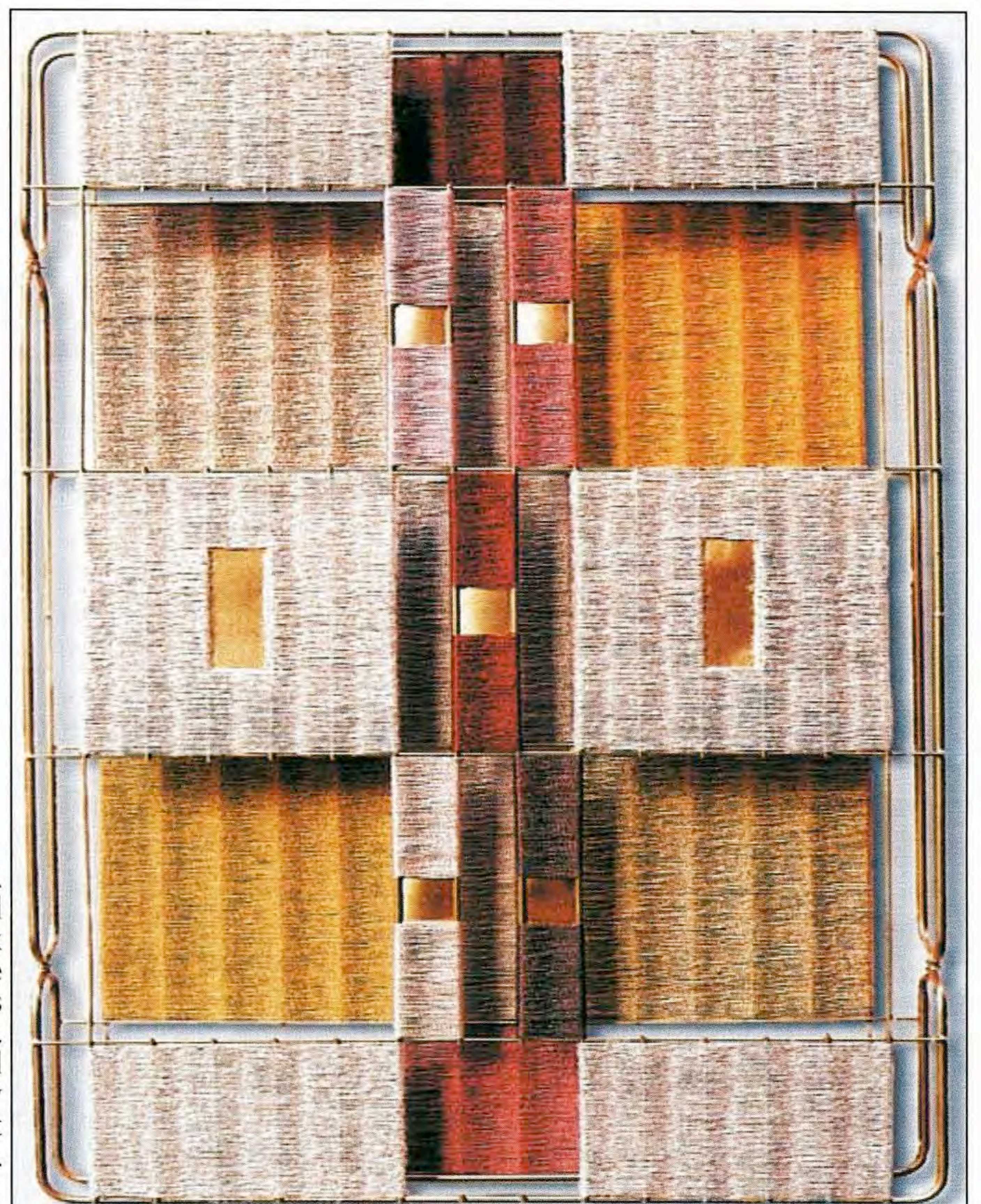
though many artists presented works of both their own design and weaving.

These Biennales enabled tapestry artists to study and understand the creative influences and forces from around the world, particularly from America, Eastern Europe and Japan. Traditional yarns and also new materials were introduced into the works including plastics, rope and sisal. Shock waves were felt throughout the tapestry producing world as tapestry no longer meant flatwoven, mural-like hangings.

The influences that forced these changes came about as much from inspiration as from national shortages. Poland, Hungary and Romania each had a tradition of tapestry and retained the traditional folk weave, having avoided the trend to imitate paintings. Shortages in traditional materials following international conflicts and economic problems forced the weavers to experiment. Rope and stiff cord produced large, free standing works.

It has been suggested that some of this work was deliberate and that the work carried an anti-state message - bodies twisted in war and internal

Right. "Fool's Gold II". Made in 1999 and measuring 41 x 23 x 4cm, the materials are linen, rayon and brass foil on a metal structure. The three dimensional design here is clearly based on different levels.



conflict. Whatever the inspiration, the Lausanne Biennales had a threefold message and challenge. They showed the idea of the development of the artist weaver producing their own works; they showed the freedom of the weaver to include other than traditional materials and also the determination to move forward from the flat murals.

All this is far removed from the ethics propounded by William Morris and the weaving over many centuries; even the last six hundred years. Names like Tadek Beutlich, Peter Collingwood, Jean Lurçat, Pierre Pauli, Sax Shaw and Archie Brennan have all played a very important part in these changes. Hillu Liebelt has produced her own designs and woven them to create a varied range of works in a number of techniques. She also uses non-traditional materials that, far from creating flat murals, create three dimensional art that is full of movement and textures that challenge the interpretive process of the mind.

From her studio at 15 Shepherds Hill, London, N6 5QJ, (Telephone/Fax 020 8340 7785), Hillu teaches tapestry classes and works upon her commissions. She has exhibited mainly in Britain and Germany as well as other European countries. There is no doubt that Hillu Liebelt is a name that we shall hear more of in the tapestry world.