

Joan Wall

Hilos invisibles [Invisible Threads]

Curating by Adriana Antidin, Ricardo Ocampo

*Joan Wall. Invisible Threads
Tapestries and Textile Structures*

"It isn't often in life that one encounters people who have a profound effect on your personal way of seeing things. Such beings are usually endowed with lucidity, spiritual largesse and an honest commitment to life.

*Just as she has been for so many other people, Joan Wall has been a decisive influence for me. Having been her disciple constitutes an experience that is far richer and more complex than a simple incorporation of knowledge. It meant discovering a generous, passionate personality, witnessing an intense, authentic creative process and recognizing an artist's complete surrender to her destiny."*¹
These are the words with which Luis Negrotti (1938-2011) describes for us the woman who was his teacher.

Joan Wall was born in Tübingen, Germany in 1923, and when she was four and a half years old, she and her parents went to live in Japan, where they resided until 1947. She would later return to Europe, and from there, she and her husband, Peter Waldbauer, would take a trip to Argentina in 1948. Although she could not know as much, that boat voyage would mark her life in terms of textiles, because there she would meet Any Jarno, with whom she would begin to work as an assistant making fabrics for upholstery and clothing manufacture soon after settling in this country.

In 1958, she travels to Europe to take an intensive weaving class in the city of Munich, and having acquired this knowledge, she returns to Buenos Aires to apply it in Jarno's studio.

*"One day, when we didn't have that much to do in the studio, Any said to me: 'You have always wanted to make a tapestry, well, make one now', and I sat down and did just that. That was in 1961."*²
The tapestries made by Joan at that time, *pictorial and flat*, as she herself described them, would bear a marked influence from her experience of living in Japan.

After several years of working with Jarno, whose studio she ran as a partner from 1959 on, she would decide to leave there in 1964 in order to dedicate herself exclusively to tapestry. That same year, she would have her first show, in the Snob gallery, located at Ayacucho and Posadas streets in the city of Buenos Aires.

*"When a few people appeared who wanted to learn with me, I launched into writing a book, because I said: 'I cannot teach without a book'. There was nothing here, so I wrote *Hilos, telares y arte (Fibers, Looms and Art)*, published by Van Riel in 1968. It was presented together with my solo show that same year."*

In the introduction to the book, humanities professor and art critic Osvaldo López Chuhurra writes: *"...Hilos, telares y arte is the title that anticipates a book of authentic values. Joan Wall, who is consciously responsible for a 'tangled mesh' of explanations and advice, sets out to untangle the mysterious process of making art, apparently complicated in one sense, but dangerously simple in many others.*

A pair of opposites—precision and freedom—concern the author, a character whose role assigns her the mission of uncovering unknowns and doubts that have to do with making and with being, related to all intentional attitudes committed to the existence of tapestries."

Her earliest tapestries featuring pre-Columbian motifs emerge in response to a proposal by gallery director Frans Van Riel (junior). Accordingly, the artist would make a tapestry inspired by her experience of visiting Humahuaca, which she titled *Pueblo andino (Andean People, 1967)*. While at the outset this relationship with pre-Columbian culture did not arise from an inner necessity, Joan would be dazzled by that world, which she would focus on particularly due to its singular wealth, while beginning to explore it further. By way of books, she would learn the ancient weaving techniques of the Americas, investigating *warakas*,³ or Andean slings, in their extremely rich variety of braiding, which she would then apply in her textile pieces.⁴

Her trips to Europe would also have an important influence on her works. She would travel to London to meet Peter Collingwood (1922-2008) in person, an English textile artist who she greatly admired.

"I conceive of my works beginning with some spark", Joan would say, adding: *"In the past, just by looking at my materials, I would say: I could do such and such a thing with this material. There is an interaction in my work between the material and the technique.*

[...] I never bring the idea to paper, I used to do that in the beginning, and I felt very limited. I make a mental image for myself, with the freedom to make

changes to it as I work, because there are certain things that you propose to yourself to do that wind up being impossible.

[...] I often veer away from the original idea. I don't do something on a small scale that I am going to do later on a large scale. I don't have the patience for it. I prefer to work directly on making the work, and when something doesn't work, I make changes.

Very often, the curves of a stick can motivate me to make a work that will be based on the form of that stick, or I have an idea that I don't carry out because I don't know how to hang it. The material that one uses has to harmonize with the shapes, and everything must harmonize with how it is mounted. I always say that the hanging of the work has to be focused on from the outset. Everything has to be ready mentally.”⁵

She finds her studio at Lavalle and Montevideo streets in the city of Buenos Aires in 1969. A large part of the textile artists who gain prominence during the 1970s would start out or spend time there. Referring to her labor as a teacher, she comments: *“...Fibers and looms have infinite possibilities: my goal is to teach them, and then let each artist follow their own path. But I cannot, nor should I, make my influence felt on the design, or on the spirit that stimulates each artist. What I hope is that each one demonstrates, in their own way, what I always preach: ‘Tapestry is its own language, and it is non-transferrable’. The loom offers the plastic effects that are implicit in its technique, and the artist’s objective should be to make the best of them, and not insist on making a reproduction of painting, but on freely creating a tapestry.”⁶*

Distinguishing features of most of Joan Wall’s work are the use of fibers with plant origins, such as sisal, hemp, phormium and jute, as well as the use of natural dyes, which come from the plants that surround her: goldenrod (yellow), woad (blue) and wild fennel (yellowish green), among others. Regarding this world in which diverse materials, techniques and colors would be combined, Gracia Cutuli, another pioneer of textile art in Argentina, describes for us: *“Entering into Joan Wall’s studio means venturing into a labyrinth of unpredictable skeins of fiber, saturated in powerful gamuts, dyed in the alchemy laboratory that is her domain, from which she can be seen to emerge every so often to compare the new batches of steaming fibers. She suddenly appears, dealing with the complicated*

structure of the looms to improve their functioning, twisting uneven threads in the distaff, gathering up materials to weave into the tapestry. Everything seems to take place simultaneously, the studio is a visual whirlwind that conceals a labor that is patient and effective.”⁷

The search for contact with nature and the need for more space for investigating vegetable dyes will lead her to establish her studio in Miramar in 1975, while also maintaining the one in Buenos Aires for a time, with her former students in charge of running it, including Silvia Sieburger, Silvina Nogués and Mimí Bujalter. Meanwhile, Joan’s life transpired between these two locations.

In this city along Argentina’s coast, the artist would concentrate on her studio work at the beginning, opting not to teach classes. It was only in 1980 that she would offer numerous courses in the neighboring city of Mar del Plata.

In 1987, on the occasion of an exhibition of Wall’s work at the Galería Marienbad, art critic and historian Nelly Perazzo writes: *“...a small community, a life lived along simple lines, the continual presence of the sea and the earth, a climate that alternates between enveloping warmth and splendid sunshine and the rough and savage character of sea winds all bring her back to the essential forces that she needs to nourish her creation.*

Because Joan Wall, ‘a relevant figure in Argentina’s textile production, a pioneer of manifestations of tapestry since the ‘60s decade, author of publications on textile techniques and educator for various generations of artists’, as Rosa Faccaro has defined her, is an artist who needs to delve deep into the roots of nature and of history.

She is motivated by an interest in the primal contact between humanity and the environment —hand spun materials, natural fibers and dyes— where textiles accompany human beings in a complete voyage, in which life and death are secret allies in elaborating the weave.”⁸

She obtained the First Prize in the II Salón Municipal de Tapices in 1973 for her work titled *Tres treinta y tres* (Three Thirty-Three), and she received the Prize for Foreigners at the IV Salón Nacional in 1982 for her piece *La honda hechizada* (The Enchanted Sling). She was a Guest of Honor in the III Salón Nacional de Tapices in 1980, and at the XVII Salón de Tapiz Bienal in 2001.

She spent her final years in the city of Mar del Plata, where she was accompanied by her friend and student Michi Isacch until her death in 2010. As an act of remembrance and in order to make her name reach new generations, she created the Premio Homenaje a Joan Wall, a prize that was awarded from 2011 to 2017 in the framework of the Salón de Arte Textil, held annually at the Museo Eduardo Sívori.

The pieces that it has been possible to bring together for this show are primarily from the 1970s and 1980s, with the exception of *Tasti*, from 1990, a work that Joan produced for the Premio Fundación Cultural Suizo Argentina, exhibited in the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires in September of that same year.

The 1971 piece *Aguas quietas* (Calm Waters) was part of a series with a marine setting, presented by the artist as part of the *Joan Wall y artistas del taller. Tapices y estructuras tejidas* (Joan Wall and Artists from the Studio, Tapestries and Woven Structures, 1971) show, held at the Galería Van Riel. *Sol de invierno* (Winter Sun) is a triptych from 1976. It was shown as part of the Panorama del Tapiz event organized by Fundación Lorenzutti (1976), in the *Veinte expresiones del tapiz argentino* (Twenty Expressions of Argentinean Tapestry, 1977) show, held at the Galería Van Riel, among other shows, including that very important event: *12 artistas del tapiz* (12 Tapestry Artists), held at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in 1982.

From 1981, *Entrevero* (Disorder) was included in the VII Salón Municipal de Tapices held that same year, while works like *Cornucopia '71* (1971), *Hondina* (Little Sling, 1984) and *Torbellino* (Whirlwind, 1984) have been exhibited on diverse occasions, and reproduced in photographs in the excellent book *Arte textil argentino hoy* (Textile Art in Argentina Today), published in 1986.

An untiring investigator exploring techniques and materials, she developed works with a highly personal aesthetic. Gallery director and art critic Hugo Bonanni defined her in the following words:

*"...A solitary creator, Joan Wall transcends in our setting by way of her followers. She transmits her knowledge with the honesty and largesse of the true masters, without founding a school, indicating a path that is only transited by true visionaries. Austere in her use of color, her forms and banners have all the power of a future landscape, where nostalgia coexists with the presence of that unicorn captive in the labyrinth of the tapestry canvas."*⁹

1 1980. August. *Tramemos* Year 2, N° 8. Bulletin of the Centro Argentino de Arte Textil (CAAT), "Homenaje a Joan Wall" by Luis Negrotti.

2 1991. June. *Tramemos* Year 13, N° 35. Bulletin of the CAAT, "Historias textiles para contar: Joan Wall", interview by Carola Segura.

3 The *waraka* (sling in quechua) is a rope that has a broader weave (*cuna*) in the center, which allows a stone to be placed there, and it is swung in circles before being launched. According to different historical sources, this tool was used during the times of the Inca empire as an effective weapon of combat, while in different indigenous societies as well as in rural environments, it was and continues to be elaborated by men for working with livestock and ceremonial use. Source: Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino.

4 Source: 1986. *Arte Textil Argentino Hoy*. "Joan Wall" by Rosa Faccaro, p. 140. Editorial E. Beutelspacher SRL.

5 1991. June. *Tramemos* Year 13, N° 35. Bulletin of the CAAT, "Historias textiles para contar: Joan Wall", interview by Carola Segura.

6 Source: 1971. Excerpt of text by Joan Wall in the catalog for "Joan Wall y artistas del taller. Tapices y estructuras tejidas", Galería Van Riel.

7 1969. Excerpt from the exhibition catalog for "Joan Wall, Tapices y divisores de ambiente", Galería Van Riel.

8 1987. Excerpt from text by Nelly Perazzo in the exhibition catalog for "Joan Wall. Tapices", Galería Marienbad, June 1 – 20, Talcahuano 1207, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

9 By Hugo Bonanni, June 1978, quoted in: 1991. June. *Tramemos* Year 13, N° 35. Bulletin of the CAAT, "Historias textiles para contar: Joan Wall", interview by Carola Segura.

Joan Wall
(Germany, 1923 - Argentina 2010)

She trained in Japan and settled in Argentina in 1948. She worked in Any Jarno's workshop, which she co-directed as a partner from 1959 to 1964, the year she ended her relationship with Jarno to focus exclusively on tapestry, and held her first exhibition at the Snob Gallery.

In 1968 she published *Hilos, telares y arte* by Ediciones Van Riel. In 1969, she founded her workshop on Lavalle Street in Buenos Aires, training artists who gained great recognition in the field of textile art.

In 1975 she moved to Miramar, and from 1980 onwards, she taught classes in Mar del Plata. Among her main solo exhibitions are those held at the Galería Antígona (1965); El Sol (1966); Galería Van Riel (1967 to 1972); Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes de Tucumán (1969); Museo de Artes Plásticas de Chivilcoy (1971); and Galería Marienbad (1987).

Among the group exhibitions she participated in are *Exposición argentina del tapiz moderno*, Galería Ática (1968); *Tapices y alfombras contemporáneas*, Museo Eduardo Sívori (1971); *Panorama del tapiz argentino*, Lorenzutti Foundation (1976); *Veinte expresiones del tapiz argentino*, Galería Van Riel (1977); *12 artistas del tapiz*, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (1982). She received the Second Prize at the I Salón Municipal de Tapices (1972); the First Prize at the II Salón Municipal de Tapices (1973); was a Guest of Honor at the III Salón Nacional de Tapices (1980); she received the Prize for Foreigners at the IV Salón Nacional de Tapices (1982); and was Guest of Honor at the XVII Salón de Tapiz Bienal (2000/2001).

Joan Wall passed away in 2010.



Hilos invisibles.
Joan Wall
08.05 / 14.06.2024
w-archivo
Viamonte 452 Buenos Aires
w-w.ar