

Jack Lenor Larsen Oral History Project: Interview with Jack Lenor Larsen

Stephanie Zollinger: It's Thursday, May 21, 2009, and I'm here with Jack Lenor Larsen. We're going to begin talking about his days at Cranbrook. So Jack, if you would, explain to us what it was like going to graduate school there and why you chose to go to Cranbrook?

Jack Lenor Larsen: At that time, in 1950, when I started, there were only two schools in America that gave a Master's degree in weaving. One was Berkeley, where it was academic and one worked with the Anthropology Department on old textiles. The other was Cranbrook, where one worked on new textiles and worked creatively rather than academically. So for that reason, and I was given a full scholarship to Cranbrook, under the recommendation of Ed Rossbach. I had been his teaching assistant in Seattle.

Stephanie Zollinger: Well, it was an exciting time to be there, I know. Did you know at the time that you and your colleagues were going to be such prominent players in the history of design?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Actually, we were not. It was our predecessors who'd been there in '39, '40, and there weren't many of them. The school was even smaller then. That was Knoll, Eames, Saarinen, Bertola, and so on. They all became famous and very important. Our classes weren't like that. Most of them became college professors except for Nosterfield and a very few others. We didn't hear of them again. Many of the women got married and that was the end of that.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you ever consider a career in academia?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes, I had gone there. I, having changed majors and having been at school already for six years, had come to like college life and thought I would pursue a Master's and then teach. I could teach philosophy with a doctorate. Marianne Strengell, whom we didn't see much of, but we could see how hard she worked, had to go by our studio to get to hers, and her life seemed rather interesting and glamorous. She'd fly off to work with Saarinen and somebody on some new project

and I thought, "Well, maybe I'll try design." Of our class, I was the most organized and capable of being focused. So I thought I'll try it for a year or two and see how it goes.

Stephanie Zollinger: I know while you were at Cranbrook, because I've talked to your friend, Helena Hernmarck, that you received far more mail than anyone else there. Can you talk about this volume of mail? Was it a way to network or was it an intentional strategy to get your name out there?

Jack Lenor Larsen: A book had just been published with quite a few of my handwoven designs in it, not important, except to handweavers. I wrote for several craft magazines. I lectured because I'd given some courses when I was 19 at the Seattle Art Museum on design and color for weavers. That's how I saw America. It's true that the studio uses the saying, "They love him in Seattle." <Laughter> That's my hometown.

Stephanie Zollinger: That is great. So, in 1951, you graduated from Cranbrook and started out on your own. Can you tell us why you chose New York and not Chicago or San Francisco?

Jack Lenor Larsen: I had been to New York in May of '51. Five of us men drove across to New York for our spring break. People said, "Oh, you should take your portfolio and you should show it to this person or that person." I even had some very good leads through a local patron. They were having a heat wave there but I persisted. Partly, then, the word Cranbrook opened doors. I would make a phone call and they said, "Oh, you're from Cranbrook. Come over." <Laughter> I loved New York. There was nothing new here then. It had been sort of sooted over and we hadn't started to build. It was very European and cosmopolitan and I felt very much at home. Later, I had some interesting bids from two Midwestern schools to come to teach. One of them was only three days a week. One of them had a Saarinen Studio attached to it and all the perks and so forth. Finally, I went back to the West Coast and I said, "No, what I really want to do is come back to New York." So I sent 39 crates of looms and yarns across country, low freight, collect. <Laughter>

Stephanie Zollinger: Collect to whom? <Laughter>

Jack Lenor Larsen: I made my way here, and both of the leads I had resulted in some employment. For one of them, a part of the payment was a six-room apartment studio on the Upper East Side. That was useful. <Laughs> The other included some cash in advance, designing for the Thai Silk Company American franchise.

Stephanie Zollinger: You also won an important commission in that year with Philip Johnson?

Jack Lenor Larsen: No, not at all.

Stephanie Zollinger: Okay.

Jack Lenor Larsen: No, that was later.

Stephanie Zollinger: Okay.

Jack Lenor Larsen: Through this contact, I was asked to do the lobby curtains for Lever House.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right.

Jack Lenor Larsen: That was the first high-rise corporate building in New York, in America. That and the good design shows were on. I ended up with more entries than any other designer. It went on for five years. Despite being unknown and hardly in production, I was included from the beginning. Also, the press were even more important than the clients because they were writing about design and architecture after the war, more than fine arts or music. Everyone was interested in how we were going to live.

Stephanie Zollinger: Would you say that this was the first time that a focus was placed on the residential interior, so that you had this canvas to work with that dealt with the floor, the walls, the windows?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Well, the focus in those days was the small, new, modern house. They weren't big. There were no longer servants'

quarters. They were modern and there were no modern fabrics. If you built one, you needed to find a weaver. I became easy to find.

Stephanie Zollinger: You were here.

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes. That was a big help. At the end of the year, I said, "Well, I might still die of starvation, but I'll get an obit." <Laughter>

Stephanie Zollinger: Maybe you can explain the company's history. When you started out, you had Jack Lenor Larsen Incorporated. Then, in 1958, you created the Larsen Design Studio?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Mm-hmm.

Stephanie Zollinger: Can you elaborate on or explain the difference between the two?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Well, the parent company manufactured and sold our fabrics. Soon we sold throughout the world.

Stephanie Zollinger: So they were more like a distributor?

Jack Lenor Larsen: And manufacturer.

Stephanie Zollinger: Okay.

Jack Lenor Larsen: Even though they had only one mill and they didn't have that for very long. We also had a handweaving studio that used their employees. But two things, one was, we were licensed to design for a growing number of larger companies. I thought originally that we would make fabrics only until we could just design them and not be bothered with all that other business. Working for big, dumb <laughs> American corporations, I began to feel that being one's boss of one's own small pond is, in some ways, better. Anyway, we, Win Anderson also felt that, she was a great help to me, the best assistant I ever had. She was a much better engineer as to, "How do we make things?", "How do we fix electricity?", or anything like that. She felt that, as our world got smaller,

her role was smaller. Making her a president of the second corporation gave her a comfortable niche. That was the other reason. She'd been briefly at your University.

Stephanie Zollinger: Correct. She worked there a semester until you happened to call her?

Jack Lenor Larsen: No.

Stephanie Zollinger: No, okay.

Jack Lenor Larsen: She heard that I was hiring someone else to be production manager and she said, "That's my job. I earned it," because she had done that type of work for me before we went to Cranbrook.

Stephanie Zollinger: I did not realize that.

Jack Lenor Larsen: So I had to undo what I had done. She said, "Okay, I'll come," and took over as production manager.

Stephanie Zollinger: So you knew her before Cranbrook?

Jack Lenor Larsen: She was a student of Rossbach and me in Seattle, a little older because she had been an officer in the WAVES.

Stephanie Zollinger: I didn't know that.

Jack Lenor Larsen: Then she took over some of my production. I had some substantial commissions in Seattle. She finished them up when I went off to New York.

Stephanie Zollinger: So she was also a weaver?

Jack Lenor Larsen: She was a weaver and felt she knew more about printing than I did. When we got into printing she was particularly helpful.

Stephanie Zollinger: So, when you had these two entities, Jack Lenor Larsen Incorporated and the Larsen Design Studio, did your designers work just within the Larsen Design Studio? Or did they work for both?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Well, our largest account for the studio was the parent company. We didn't use "Inc." We wrote out "incorporated" without a capital "I." Others used "Inc." but we tried to avoid it.

Stephanie Zollinger: I understand. Incorporated. In looking back, do you think that was the right decision? Were the results what you had hoped for?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Often, but the illogic of these large companies drove me crazy, how wasteful they were and how much they were often just treading water or they didn't understand design. They made every mistake you could. It didn't make sense because their profits grew at that time in spite of all this. It was not a friendly place for a designer. Finally, on our sheet and towel accounts, I said, "You can come talk to us, but we're not going to go up there." I'd seen three in-house designers die of cancer, just for the frustration of working for a company that didn't have a clue as to what creativity was about. It was all bottom line.

Stephanie Zollinger: So it was challenging, starting out and trying to find the right fit with the mills that went along with your vision.

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes, and they tended to be foreign. The European mills were family-owned. They were a delight to work with. They had a long view. They weren't worried about this year but the next generation. All those foreign craftsmen who we worked with in many, many countries, they all had the same sense of logic <laughs> as we did.

Stephanie Zollinger: I think I read somewhere that at the height you had relationships with maybe 33 mills overseas? Is that about right?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Maybe more. Certainly over time, we did. Some of them were very close. I soon had friends in a hundred cities.

Stephanie Zollinger: <Laughs>

Jack Lenor Larsen: I liked that. I never enjoyed being a tourist.

Stephanie Zollinger: So was language ever a barrier with the mills? Did you draw pictures in trying to communicate?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Well, fortunately, most of them spoke English. If not, I would have a manager or somebody on our team that had languages. Our Swiss employees all had to have three or four languages so they were helpful. That's where we started in Europe.

Stephanie Zollinger: That was Larsen International?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: So, in this grand scheme of things, when you had your United States office and then you had the offices abroad, who managed the offices abroad? Was it someone from New York or did you have a new manager overseas?

Jack Lenor Larsen: We started off with three people in Zurich and eventually I think there were ten. They tended to be multilingual. We moved them from Switzerland to Germany to be inside the Common Market. Switzerland had not come in.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you train them or did they come here to learn what the Larsen vision was?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Both. I would be over there six or eight times a year. I could do almost everything, open exhibitions, work on new designs and plans of spaces, and so forth. Finance or sales or other production people would also go there. We did a lot of travel back and forth.

Stephanie Zollinger: At your height you had Larsen International, you had Larsen Carpet, Larsen Furniture, and Jack Lenor Larsen Incorporated. Did you ever think, "How am I going to handle all this?"

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes, I did.

Stephanie Zollinger: <Laughs>

Jack Lenor Larsen: Two things. One, I was like the hub of the axle. But, as there were more and more spokes, I realized that being the Grand Central of all of this was not my favorite activity.

Stephanie Zollinger: And master promoter.

Jack Lenor Larsen: Well, I was pretty good at it, actually, and had some good people helping me. I got far enough along with analysis that I realized that I could have what I wanted if I asked for it.

Stephanie Zollinger: Okay. <Laughs>

Jack Lenor Larsen: One of the things I decided I wanted was someone to run the business. We hired Jim Jereb out of a big corporation. He was one smart M.B.A. We hired a lot of others that were useless, but he was masterful. He said, "My business is people and money." That sounded pretty good to me. We'd never been profitable. Our sales grew. Our staff grew and everything grew but the bottom line. <Laughs>

Stephanie Zollinger: Your purse. <Laughs>

Jack Lenor Larsen: Partly it was because I would be embarrassed about taking money. Jim was not and it became very successful. Then we grew faster with too many home-owned showrooms and such, but that did happen. As Europe became a little more complicated and was changing with Common Market rulings and more staff and so on, it was very useful to have an executive branch of our little empire. <Laughs>

Stephanie Zollinger: Well, I'm going to backtrack and go back to the earlier days and maybe talk about some of your innovations. For example, you were the first to do the diagonal-stripe weave. Your company was the first to print on velvet, on a velvet pile. What was it like? Was it exciting? Was it mind-boggling or were you in your zone?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Some people would say that weaving is always horizontal or vertical. Well, why is that? I didn't know that the Navajos and others had what they call wedge weave, too, but we did this early on. Then there was an Italian handweaver when Italy was industrializing. Soon, there weren't Italian handweavers. Then I revived it successfully in Thailand, years later. I loved doing things I didn't know how to do yet. Most people try to do very difficult things, complex weaves and such, that had already been done. I was keen to do things that were not done. I was lucky enough to be fascinated with all the resists, ikat, batik, plangi. We collected some. Then, when we started in Thailand. They, the up-country people, wove ikat. We learned how to make it there in production quantities for the first time. Not a skirt length, but a 40-yard roll.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you look at fashion for inspiration?

Jack Lenor Larsen: No, they looked to us for inspiration. We were plagued with them coming, wanting swatches to base their next year's colors on. We were invited to work as fashion designers. Most of them had a big, bad brother behind the scenes. It was very fast and a little exciting. Treacherous. They didn't pay and they ran things the way they wanted, and there wasn't much you could do about it. One of the good ladies showed me some of the things she bought abroad and they were perfectly wonderful, for very little money. She said, "You have to stick to furnishing." That was good advice.

Stephanie Zollinger: <Laughs>

Jack Lenor Larsen: And so we sort of withdrew from that field.

Stephanie Zollinger: Well, in getting back to some of your innovations, I know when you worked with *Primavera*, the printing process was challenging. Were these endeavors more challenging than you initially had anticipated? Or what fabric was the most challenging in terms of innovations? And then was there one that you came across that you thought would be challenging, but in the end was quite easy?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Well, the big job on the printed velvet was finding, or creating, the right velvet. Normal velvets have a rather long, dense pile and the print would only be on the top of it and then it would be white

underneath. If you wore it very much the color would abrade and the white would show. We worked with an American mill to develop a very dense, low pile velvet on which we could print. Almost all of the pile was involved.

Stephanie Zollinger: Because, by using cotton, the dye would then penetrate the length of that short fiber?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Right. It did on other piles we tried as well. Mohair was glorious, but it took five days to dry. It was so thick. And the mill said, "We won't print that again."

Stephanie Zollinger: <Laughs>

Jack Lenor Larsen: Anyway, it was incredibly well-received because of the dazzling color but people didn't know what to do with it. We were on the verge of thinking, "Well, maybe we should try it on another cloth." Suddenly, they all figured it out and we couldn't keep up with the orders.

Stephanie Zollinger: Once interior designers knew how to specify it and to use it.

Jack Lenor Larsen: In Europe, we got huge orders for rather stuffy old guild houses and such in brilliant colors. They hung it upside down to make it even brighter. <Laughter> It is also very good upholstery. It doesn't soil and it doesn't wear. Any pile, even silk, is extremely durable as a pile because the pile acts like springs. It resists.

Stephanie Zollinger: The abrasion?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Abrasion.

Stephanie Zollinger: Great. One question I had is that you've been described as a man with impeccable taste, a man with endless ideas and an abundance of curiosity. Was this something that you think is innate, or was it something that you think developed over the years, or perhaps was taught to you by your parents?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Organization was something my mother was very strong in. There was a place for everything and a time for everything and so forth. I didn't go along with that until I left home and then I sort of adopted it. <Laughter> My dad had gravely bad taste, I think, but he was a contractor. He learned to break the rules. I didn't agree with the way he did it. I had a great interior design professor who attempted to teach taste and refinement. In the post-war years we wanted revolution, not worrying about which of the thousand reds to use and things like that. But she, to an extent, succeeded and at least realized how important it was. Whereas we kept looking at European modern innovation, she kept pointing to classical Oriental perfection. We started to like that, too. No, it can be taught. I don't think it's something one is particularly born with but one learns slowly. I once asked my Cranbrook master how she imagined a small sample and how it was going to look, 200 yards of it, across the room. She said, "With time and experience." <Laughter>

Stephanie Zollinger: And was she right? <Laughs>

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes. I eventually have been around long enough and I have enough experience that I developed, so I can pretty much do that too. It took a little doing.

Stephanie Zollinger: So, with these mentors that you had, when you began on your own and even to this day, are there little pointers that still come to mind or are there remnants of what you were taught? Times when you think, "My Cranbrook days are coming back."

Jack Lenor Larsen: Speaking of Cranbrook days, I soon realized, after being in New York, that I had been more creative in Seattle, where I was not taught fabric design. I was taught how to weave, and I was taught about architectural design, and then I made a fusion of the two. Some of it hadn't been done before. At Cranbrook, I learned to work like my master and had to shed a lot of that. I learned, with the new challenges, I needed new solutions. I often harked back then to my earliest weaving and how to get the power loom to do things that the handloom could do. I had a great loom fixer <laughs> who could make that happen. I was working 80, 100 hours a week and that helped. Persistence and drive, I came to realize, were more important than skills.

Stephanie Zollinger: I know that you had a lot of drive, particularly when trying to work out printing techniques, such as *Primavera*. You know, they said, "Jack was driven. He wanted to find a solution. He did not want to stop."

Jack Lenor Larsen: Right. I had good support. Win was even more fascinated by the chemistry and things of that sort. Soon we were exposed to warp knitting and carpet weaving and terry towel weaving and all sorts of things that were new to us.

Stephanie Zollinger: And I'm sure, as you traveled more around the world, your curiosity continued to grow?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes, and people from around the world came to us because they realized that we could make something out of markets that didn't exist yet. It was even more of that happening than traveling to find these things.

Stephanie Zollinger: And I know you often said, and you said it again today, "I enjoy doing what I don't know how to do."

Jack Lenor Larsen: Mm-hmm.

Stephanie Zollinger: Is there anything left that you haven't done that you wish you had tried or conquered?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Oh, lots of things. <Laughter> People say, "I didn't know you designed ceramic glasses." I tried designing anything that they would let me.

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes. I know you worked with Dansk on the Bamboo Collection.

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes, and even more with Mikasa. That was interesting. They sent Japanese potters to work in our warehouse. We would do the shapes and profiles and so forth, and they would instantly

turn them into three dimensions in clay. That afternoon, we would go to the next step. That worked very well.

Stephanie Zollinger: The showing at the Louvre, was that your proudest memory?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Well, one of the things that was fun about it, I was 50 and all the Paris papers talked about the new designer. <Laughter> Being new at 50! That was pretty good.

Stephanie Zollinger: Talk about what it felt like because here you are, 50 years old, and not everyone gets to have their work shown at such a venue.

Jack Lenor Larsen: Well, the first American to have a solo show in Palais du Louvre was Mark Tobey. I knew him from Seattle and New York and saw the show. That's what gave me the idea. Wouldn't that be something? Particularly because we were so much in Europe and I was so often in Paris. I'd had a lot of shows in Europe, some big retrospectives in important museums but, somehow, this was a little different.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you contact the Louvre and suggest it?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Our press agent did. He was an American in Basel and very much connected with such things. He'd been involved with Knoll, who also started in Zurich in Europe. Much to my surprise, his attitude was, "Oh, they would be delighted!" <Laughter> And indeed, they were. <Laughs>

Stephanie Zollinger: So how long did a show like that take to put together? Was it a year that you had to think about it?

Jack Lenor Larsen: I think a little more. We had a good team.

Stephanie Zollinger: Okay.

Jack Lenor Larsen: Including a dance photographer who did the photographs and also designed the catalogue.

Stephanie Zollinger: Okay. We'll get back to the Larsen Design Studio. I know, as the years went on, you became more the promoter of what was happening and less, I don't want to say less involved in the studio because you were, but less involved in terms of working on your own designs. Is that true?

Jack Lenor Larsen: No. I did both. I worked two shifts. I could manage. I also had two secretaries at one point, and I had a cook, and a housekeeper. The idea was that I wouldn't do anything that wasn't useful. Everything else would get done for me so I'd have more time. I became a team player. Maybe that was after so much analysis and therapy. For years, I would say, "I have this vision, and this is what it looks like, and this is how it could be done." I'd get people to help me do it. As a team player, I would say, "We have a great opportunity or problem. How are we going to solve it?" It was like being a member of a small chamber group, being a member, not the dictator. That was good fun.

Stephanie Zollinger: Because you came up with the concept?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Sometimes, but sometimes, it was just, "We have an opportunity here," or, "We have a problem." I worked with others rather than having them simply work as assistants. We all liked it better and it was more productive because we had about four chiefs working different areas.

Stephanie Zollinger: You were the one that would ultimately approve the design and then it would go on to production or the next phase of the process?

Jack Lenor Larsen: We would have production samples approved. In fact, we worked with it all the way through sampling. It was one of the reasons why our designs were better. We weren't handing something to producers and hoping it comes out alright. <Laughs> That seldom works.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right.

Jack Lenor Larsen: It comes off as a copy. No, we all worked. That was one of the differences. I had executives say, "Jack, stop quibbling with them. It's good enough. It'll sell." <Laughs> That wasn't my attitude. Why bother if it's not going to be special?

Stephanie Zollinger: Or the way you want it.

Jack Lenor Larsen: Mm-hmm.

Stephanie Zollinger: I have just a few other questions. When you think back over your clientele, I know in working with interior design, I have clients that are very easy to work with and some that are more challenging. Were there any clients that you had that you can say that you really enjoyed working with? It was a collaborative venture?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes. Ed Barnes was one who was very approving. He's very good about that. Louis Kahn and so on.

Stephanie Zollinger: You even taught him to weave, didn't you? Louis Kahn?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes. We actually did, slowly, but he was so busy traveling it was hard to learn. Afterwards, I tried to do some projects after I left the studio in which I thought I could save them, these were not-for-profits, so much money by shortcutting the equivalent of Larsen and the interior designer. They would get it at mill cost. I realized how important those two units were and how much work they put in and that it's very different. I felt guilty that our production was using cost materials and it was for a small percentage of people. I thought we should do a Chevrolet that was more available, more affordable. One idea was I was going to do a really inexpensive fabric for Harlem, for the really poor. Then I learned they wouldn't want it.

Stephanie Zollinger: <Laughs>

Jack Lenor Larsen: They wanted what the lower middle class has.
<Laughs>

Stephanie Zollinger: They always want the level above. <Laughs>

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes, not something wonderful. Saarinen was a very important client because he challenged us continuously, and so did his successor firm. It's his birthday now. A lot of that is coming up again.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right. I went to see a show. They had a show of his work at the Walker and the Minneapolis Institute of Art, which was wonderful.

Jack Lenor Larsen: Mm-hmm. There's one coming here soon, as well. No, he was difficult and not charming.

Stephanie Zollinger: But did you like that, being challenged and having to really strive to come up with a solution?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Yes, I did. His wife would provide the charm that he seemed to lack.

Stephanie Zollinger: <Laughs>

Jack Lenor Larsen: He was persistent and through forty years his offices were collaborating. <Laughs> He also used the same landscape architect, the same sculptors. He had a few colleagues that we worked with.

Stephanie Zollinger: When you worked with most clientele, did they tell you what they had in mind or a vision, then you went and, whatever you did, they would accept? Or were they a little more difficult than that?

Jack Lenor Larsen: Oh, all of the above. <Laughter> All of the above.

Stephanie Zollinger: Okay. A couple of questions that I have are, I've been a big fan of *Magnum* over the years. I was just wondering if you could elaborate and talk about how *Magnum* was developed and why you chose to do the Mylar and such a time-intensive technique for the Phoenix Opera House.

Jack Lenor Larsen: I did the Phoenix Opera House. They had a quirky younger designer working on the fabrics. It was his idea, at least, that it should have mirror work involved and maybe the colors of patinas and all these things. We were just getting into machine embroidery then with a very creative man in New Jersey. Somehow we got the idea, if we covered mirror Mylar with enough stitches, we could create negative mirrors. It was a workable idea. It was expensive but it was okay. But there were so many stitches that even though this Mylar was in a thick vinyl casing, which was very tough, it was perforating, like stamps.

Stephanie Zollinger: <Laughs>

Jack Lenor Larsen: The samples on the loom are ten yards long. At that time they cost a thousand dollars, I mean ten thousand today. We finally had one that seemed alright. I sent it out to the drapery maker in Los Angeles to test it for dry cleaning. I happened to be in Haystack when he called back and he said, "Sonny, do you know each half of that curtain is going to be 300 yards long and it's not going to be sent to a dry cleaner. If you're lucky, they'll vacuum it." <Laughter> So that solved that.

Stephanie Zollinger: <Laughs> Oh, my goodness. Thank you so much.

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