

## Jack Lenor Larsen Oral History Project: Interview with Lotus Stack

**Stephanie Zollinger:** It is Tuesday, November 17, 2009, and I'm here with Lotus Stack. She's retired but for many years she served as the textile curator at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. She's graciously agreed to talk to us today about Jack Lenor Larsen, her connection with Jack, and how she was instrumental in bringing the Larsen Archive to Minnesota. So, Lotus, maybe we could start with you giving us some background information about where you grew up, how you became interested in textiles, and your schooling?

**Lotus Stack:** I grew up in California. I was born in Northern California but most of my schooling was done in the San Francisco area. As a child, I think I was about ten, there was a program called Junior Museums in the San Francisco area. It was a program that involved a consciousness of collecting art history in a particular media. It was a hands-on program for children. One of the possibilities was a weaving studio. It wasn't very popular. I remember doing it and enjoying it. My mother said that the head of that studio said that they had to lock me out at noon because I wouldn't go to lunch because I was having so much fun! I didn't do anything again with weaving until I was in college, and then I was a Studio Arts major in my undergraduate work.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** At which college?

**Lotus Stack:** San Francisco State. My brother had gone to Berkeley so, of course, I couldn't go to Berkeley. I had to go to somewhere else. San Francisco State was convenient and it worked. I was in the last group to register and the only course open to me was a weaving course, everything else was filled up. So my textile endeavors were sort of haphazard for quite a bit of time in my early life. I graduated from school with a Studio Arts degree in Ceramics and a minor in History. Then I was out of school for five years. During that time I got married, moved to the East Coast, and then my husband got a job here in Minnesota. So, in my mind, I moved to the provinces. Then, I decided to go back to graduate school. I went to the University of Minnesota and specialized in South Asian languages, particularly in Bengali literature. At that time, I felt I wanted something to relax and help me unwind from my academic endeavors. A

ceramic involvement was too time committing. If you throw a pot, you need the time to trim it. I remembered that I enjoyed weaving so I bought a loom because you can just leave it for months at a time and not come back to it. I must say, it was hard for me to leave it. I really enjoyed the weaving process, and designing, and unwinding. I never finished my doctorate because my graduate advisor left. As I told someone, the new person who came in was a young hotshot from Philadelphia. I was too young to be patient with him and I was too old to be impressed by him. My husband and I were beginning to like Minnesota. I didn't like the idea of going to a school and teaching in the same school. It becomes too inbred. I didn't see any particular future in continuing my degree. I decided that having a family would be a fun idea.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So, at this point in time, did you have any textile background other than weaving?

**Lotus Stack:** No. I continued my weaving and enjoyed that. People asked me to start teaching in the Weavers Guild in different teaching centers around the area. They kept telling me I was a great weaver. Well, I knew I wasn't a great weaver. I mean, I could weave and do things, but I'd look around at the world of cloth and decided I'd better know more about this endeavor. I went to the museum to see if I could talk to someone, to study their collections. I had a hard time connecting to anybody who would talk to me. I was a teaching assistant for Jon Eric Riis, who was teaching ikat at the time. That's a particular favorite technique that I'm interested in. He asked me about the museum. I told him I'd totally given up on it. There was just nothing I could do. He said, "You have to try one last time." I did. I got hold of a University of Minnesota graduate intern on her last day at the museum. She arranged for me to see the curator. The curator said, yes, I could look at the collections, if I would provide them with any information I found in studying them. Of course, my idea of museums at that time was that they knew everything. I tried to explain to them I was no great expert on all of this. Then I looked at their records and thought, "Well, maybe I can help here." There were some gaps and unsuitable information although, by and large, in retrospect, the records were pretty good as museums go. I was an intern for about nine months and then they offered me a job. When you have a job, you've got to do the best you can so you start doing research.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Your job as the textile curator?

**Lotus Stack:** No, just a job organizing the textile collections, which were then part of the Decorative Arts Department. I soon realized a lot more work needed to be done, so I wrote grants. I wrote myself into the grants. I applied for a Museum Studies grant and did an internship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That was a possibility because of a unique connection of my husband, who is very jocular. I knew people here at the University of Minnesota, too. We were all trying to get a better handle on how to professionally handle museum textile collections. This was also true of the Science Museum of Minnesota. There were several of us who had originally been teachers at the Weavers Guild and we'd all become more serious about what we were doing. We got together and hired the textile conservator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to come out and teach a course. The museum said they'd give me a free room. This was all ad hoc. Then the university asked if they could be part of it. Since several people were back in Graduate School I was happy because then they could get credit for it. So the community was fantastic, how it worked together to make things happen. I was so impressed at the sense of "united we stand." It was an amazing place. The person we hired, Nobuko Kajitani, the Head of the Textile Conservation Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, during the couple of weeks she gave the course here, got to know my husband, who constantly joked with her. Between them, they came up with the idea of an internship. Because I had young children, I felt there was no way I could go off for a year and do that. Well, they devised a system. My husband was incredibly supportive, not just with his talk, but by taking care of these young children while I was away. I'd go away for three or four weeks to New York, study textile conservation, come back, work for two or three months, then go back again. I did three sessions with lots of telephone calls in between. It was a set of circumstances and a government grant system that was innovative to the real needs of the people involved.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** That is great.

**Lotus Stack:** It was. I was so impressed. I tend to knock the government and think they're in a bureaucratic mire at times, but I've had several circumstances where government institutions have been flexible enough to handle things and I've been gratified. I took a course in Lyon, France. I went to lots of conferences and talked to people. My background has been pieced together but I got enough from Graduate School here at the University of Minnesota, albeit in a different subject. I certainly had the skills with which to move forward. I had gone to graduate school under fellowships and it made me happy that I could use what I learned,

although it was in a different discipline than intended, to give tax dollars back to my country. I feel grateful that fellowship support does pay off to the greater interest, a little ad for NEA and NEH and all of that.

I started doing a lot of grant writing, which is one of the things that one does in many disciplines. I worked at the museum and tried to look for different ways that would be innovative for the museum, which had a good collection of about 2,500 to 3,000 textiles, depending on how you counted objects. I thought how I could make a difference because we were never going to get the greatest ancient art textile collection. One of the things I thought is that people weren't paying too much attention to contemporary textiles. I felt that they were making a great contribution. This was in the 1970s and the '80s, and onwards. I felt that this was a way we could leverage our non-existent funds because I always had to raise money for everything. There were no established endowments or anything for textiles at the museum. One of the reasons I chose contemporary textiles, both in the design field and the one-of-a-kind fiber art pieces, was the general interest from the community. There is a craft consciousness in the Twin Cities area, which the Minnesota Museum fostered in the '50s with great shows.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Consumers have also been shrewd in that area because of what's been happening.

**Lotus Stack:** That's right, absolutely. So it was a good environment here, and it was a possibility because people in museums, particularly more established museums, were not paying much attention to that sort of thing. I felt it was a bit of a long shot but this was a time where I would be able to get involved. I would meet people, meet artists, meet producers. I wrote my first letter to Jack Lenor Larsen, who had always been a kind of hero to me, because of the innovative things that he was doing.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So he had been on your radar?

**Lotus Stack:** On my radar for a long time, and not just because I thought his work was interesting, but also as a personal interest. In terms of the museum, it tended to make sense. So, in 1978, I wrote my first letter to him asking if he would contribute pieces to our collection. I had been talking to Nobuko Kajitani, this was about the time I was taking this internship at the Met, and she said, "Write the letter soon." What she

didn't tell me was that she knew that he was going to do a one-person show, a company show, at the Louvre. That would boost his profile so it would be harder to get pieces. At the time, I can't actually remember if I got a response from him or not or if, indeed, maybe I was too afraid to write the letter. I wasn't raised to ask people for something for nothing and I had no leverage. We were relatively unknown. The name of the museum was certainly respected but we had no collection. We had no profile in textiles. I continued and made contact and he made his first donation to us in 1984. He was very generous. We would show pieces periodically. We had a disadvantage as we had no permanent gallery. For people to give us things, as my idea of payback, there were lots of ways of remunerating somebody and it isn't always in money. By showing contemporary pieces in a museum, it gives them a higher profile and that gives them exposure that they can leverage out in their own career and way. I worked on that. I did several ideas and programs but, in terms of Larsen, that's how we started. Then I think he gave us some more things in the '90s. I would have to look up to see what happened. My youngest daughter was also interested in textiles. We would play games as we'd go to museums and see textiles, or in different places, "How do you think that's made?" She told me she was not interested in historical pieces. She was only interested in certain contemporary pieces.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** She told me a story of how her older sister had received a loom for Christmas and she ended up being the one that actually enjoyed it.

**Lotus Stack:** Yes, that was an interesting thing because she was two and a half at the time. She wanted to play with this thing. I said, "No, wait until you're four." Besides, it was her sister's. After her sister got bored with the Christmas present, in January I said, "Sure, go and play with it." I was busy and she taught herself. She had heard me talk about weaving and I heard her repeating, "Open the shed, pass the shuttle through." I was amazed. It was truly amazing that she had done that. As a young child she taught herself fork weaving, which was tapestry weaving at one point, so she had this interest. It was an interesting thing for me thinking, how much should I push it or not? My husband is a musician and we had thought, what happens if we have a prodigy musician? We'd always talked about that. We would encourage them but never push it very much because we'd seen so many fantastic musicians lead screwed up lives because of this. With Krista, it took a slightly different turn. I tried to answer any questions that she had but never said, "Why don't you do this?" or "Why don't you try this?" It was a game that we had to try and

work out how things were made. She kept up that interest. Then, when she was in high school in an English class, she was asked to write a letter. Did she tell you all this?

**Stephanie Zollinger:** She talked about writing the letter to Jack as part of an assignment.

**Lotus Stack:** Well, I don't think we need to repeat that then. That's right. So she had made that connection. I think you know the rest of that story from her. We had this connection with Larsen and that continued. Then she eventually got a job. I would go to the Larsen Studio every time I went to New York, and obviously would see my daughter at the same time, but we had a connection.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So you first noticed Larsen in the '70s?

**Lotus Stack:** Right. I may have noticed him in the '60s, actually.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** That's the height of when he was most innovative?

**Lotus Stack:** Incredibly innovative, that's right.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** He had advertisements. He had products everywhere in terms of the interior environment, rugs, casements, and upholstery fabrics. Was it in the advertising that you noticed him?

**Lotus Stack:** You know, it's interesting, I don't know. I've asked myself that question, why did I know him? I just knew him. I had a consciousness of several people who were doing things as hand weavers.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Was it the colors that he used or was it the weave you were looking at?

**Lotus Stack:** It was the weave. I definitely was looking at the weave. I think he was in more periodicals like the *American Crafts*. I can't even remember the name of their publication at the time, it's changed its name several times. I would read those magazines and see it there. It was not

advertising that hit me. I think it was more in craft publications where he was highlighted that I became conscious of him. I was conscious of him as a weaver because that's where my interest was. I was interested in what he was doing with threads and textures. Then, as he moved on with more complex things, how he made the change from using a power loom to get handwoven looks. The business aspect peripherally fascinated me because I'm interested in systems and how they work, and bigger projects, and programs, and how they interface. I would meander but it would have gone no further than just being interested in it if I hadn't been at the museum. Then I had the time and the motivation to really look into it and see what was happening.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So, as a weaver, did you look at his work?

**Lotus Stack:** I would derive inspiration from it, absolutely.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Would you look at it and say, "He's doing things I wish I had thought of" or did you do it in amazement of, "How can he even do this because it's so complicated?"

**Lotus Stack:** No, it wasn't that complicated. Maybe that was the fascination of it, look at what this man is doing with relatively simple things. How does this inspire me to go on? I would use it for students, too, in talking to them and saying, "Look, you need more exposure. Look at the world around you. What's happening? How can you take this and not replicate it." That was something I wasn't interested in, seeing the basic principles that are happening and how you can tap into that same force that inspires you.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So it's more concept-driven?

**Lotus Stack:** Absolutely.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So it's really, he was global when there wasn't really a global market?

**Lotus Stack:** That's right

**Stephanie Zollinger:** And how he looked at designs in Africa and then translated them back.

**Lotus Stack:** His publications that he had done on fiber art people, *Beyond Craft*. I forget the other one now but they were big books. They were glossy. He had a bigger consciousness and knew how to advertise. He is an advertising genius. All the energy he would take and not be too refined to the textile world. He was very involved with interior designers and with architecture. Then there was his global training, looking at textiles and those kinds of things. Things like his African Collection, which was inspired by Africa but didn't replicate it. So many people in the '60s looking at ethnographic textiles would try to do just what the natives did. Well, the natives were always going to be much better at doing that than we would be. How could we use that in our own way? It was definitely a concept that fascinated me but there was a certain amount of empiricism about it. It wasn't concept like the modernist theorist, who didn't so much apply it. Ultimately, I'm sure I was conditioned by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts, the quality of your everyday life around you and bringing that in. That has been a motivating force for me.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** What adjectives would you use to describe the work of Jack Lenor Larsen?

**Lotus Stack:** Basically, in general, it is innovative. Clever seems trite but innovative and the ability to resonate to the aesthetic consciousness of the time. It would be as in the '60s, when simple weaves and the joy of thread and texture was the driving force in much more than just textiles. We tend to think of thread in textiles but it was a consciousness of texture and of not being too fussy. It was very much the modernist kind of consciousness being brought down into everyday living and tying in with the ethnographic push that was going forward. He had ability to be innovative all along the way. He would, in the '80s, when things got to be more subtle and more sophisticated, go into that. In the '90s, with synthetics, good synthetics, he would go to the source, to look at different sources, and not just depend on the same thing. That ability to move along with each era is very hard to do. People so often get stuck. I think that's probably a key factor in Jack's success, not to stick with the glory of the moment but to keep moving on.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Moving on?



**Lotus Stack:** Yes.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Do you think that's one of the greatest contributions that he's made to the field?

**Lotus Stack:** I think that's certainly an important one. I've tried to synthesize Jack in my mind a lot, especially from '99 on since '98 is when we actually got the collection, trying to work out what was so essential and how could you really synthesize him. I haven't been able to do it. I must say that, working with Jack and talking to him, I've grown a much greater respect. I thought, "He's going to be the PR man." I mean, clearly he's good at that and can talk. I thought, "He's going to be slick and he's just made his career off of other people's backs." Certainly, he has done that but other people weren't willing to go to all the parties. That wasn't their interest. I'm much more sympathetic to get myopic about things. Jack, I think, certainly is good at being myopic but he knows how important is the broader outreach of repeating the same thing over and over again, using PR effectively.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** He's a genius at that.

**Lotus Stack:** He is, but you know what was interesting to me is that he's got a healthy ego. You have to have that. He also knows how to leverage his ego and knows it's a tool. That gave me a lot of respect for him because so many people who get in that mode just totally fall in love with themselves and forget about how to leverage out things and laugh at situations. I certainly don't think he's the greatest person that ever lived but I certainly have tremendous respect, and more respect the more I work with him, than I did a superficial look of 30 years watching him. He was able to see the potential of something, take it back to his studio, get the people back there, the Win Andersons, the Mark Pollacks, and people of that order, and get them to leverage it out and move forward.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Yes, because while he was out promoting Jack Lenor Larsen he had to hire people that shared his same vision. So, in a way, I think he was very intelligent to hire the Mark Pollacks, the Paul Gedeohns, because they, too, helped move the company forward.

**Lotus Stack:** That kept them going. I actually think that an amazing amount of credit has to be given to him to make the transition between Win Anderson leaving and him keeping the company. I have so much respect for her. You see Charles and Ray Eames, and Ray Eames didn't get as much attention, but she got some. Within the industry, Win Anderson had a known profile. I think that was satisfying enough for her. I felt, and still have a little feeling in the back of my mind, that she should have had much more recognition for what she did to keep it all going, for working out the details. Ideas are kind of cheap. He would come back and say, "I found this textile, we could do such and such with those." Then Larsen would leave and Win would work out the such and such and so and so, and the rest of the team, and that's a lot of work. It made me feel better that that's what she wanted to do. She was happy. I can sympathize with that. I would love to do that. I'm so glad for a good museum director who will then push it forward. I think, though, that when her health required that she had to retire, he was good about it because it took a year. It was very hard for her to leave, I'm sure. It was a year before she realized she just couldn't do it any more physically.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** I think she left, am I right, in the '70s?

**Lotus Stack:** Yes, in the mid-'70s, in '74, '75, or '76. I know Mark Pollack. He knew that this was going to happen, Larsen kept Mark on a string until Win made up her mind. He was honorable in that sense, he didn't just drop her and then bring in Mark. It made me feel bad because Mark met Win only once and heard about her in the very last year when she was physically under a lot of stress. He was a much sharper personality. That generation immediately after her, when you talk to them, they're not as kind and understanding as I think she was.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Or they don't understand her contributions?

**Lotus Stack:** That's right. It happens when you're young. Jack was very good about getting young energy coming in. When you're young, you never really recognize the shoulders that you're standing on to move forward. They always look a little bit old fashioned to you. As I've progressed on in my career, particularly with this project, I think, "Have I done that to the people that came in to the museum?" But it happens. The next person coming in will say, "Why on earth did she do this?" It takes a long time to understand how you work within a structure and move

forward. In that sense, Jack was brilliant to be able to catch young people. They were very impressed and devoted to him. They sometimes, after a while, got tired of his moving forward and being caught up with all the details and not getting the kind of recognition. I asked Jim Jareb, I don't know if you've talked to him?

**Stephanie Zollinger:** No, I haven't been able to.

**Lotus Stack:** I asked him once, why, when you had so many designers that were so good, why didn't you give them recognition? Of course, I'm talking now from a point of view where everybody gets their name on everything and it's leveraging out for money. In those days, people didn't do that so much. Jareb's remark was that it was hard enough to get recognition for one name and you needed to focus on that. I think Jack knew that too. So, although he's got a healthy ego and appreciated it, he knew it was leverage and he knew it was an efficient tool to move forward to.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** If you were to curate a show with just a few of the most significant fabrics produced by Jack Lenor Larsen Incorporated which fabrics would those be and why?

**Lotus Stack:** I'd probably pick each decade. In the '50s, I'd pick some of the woven casement fabric. The '60s, I would do the printed velvets. I would choose *Olympia*, maybe, from the '50s. There were several during that era. It's more a class of fabric. I'd pick something that was innovative or that represented that period. The printed velvets were the big contribution he made then. In the '70s, maybe some of the landscape-type textiles, the larger images.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** *Hills of Home?*

**Lotus Stack:** Yes, that kind of thing, because that was innovative. Again, he wasn't the only person doing that, using graphics. In the '80s it would be the more subtle, the Thai silks, some of the things that he was doing there, moving forward to a more sophisticated pattern. In the '80s and '90s there were several other companies that were beginning to do innovative things but I would probably pick synthetic casements back in the '90s. The '80s would have been some of the upholstery fabrics that were subtle and

drawing more on historic traditions as they were coming back, and reinterpreting them, historic meaning the French and more classic things which were so disdained in the '60s and '70s. In the late '90s I was more drawn to their casement fabrics and synthetics and some of the things that they were doing with Japan and Korea. Then, after that, I don't know if Krista told you but they are no longer an American company? They're based in France. Their ownership is in England but the design studio is in Paris, which is an interesting change.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Cowtan & Tout?

**Lotus Stack:** Cowtan & Tout are in England. They remain in England but the design studio is no longer in New York. It has been moved to France. There is a French designer, who was an intern of Krista's, who is now the Design Studio head there, Ariane Dalle.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** That's interesting. You were very instrumental in bringing the Larsen archive to the State of Minnesota. Can you tell us how this whole collection arrived in Minnesota?

**Lotus Stack:** Well, it was basically because my daughter worked for the company. She was head of the Design Studio. It had been bought out by an English company, Colefax and Fowler, and was run by their American subsidiary, Cowtan & Tout, but maintained as a separate line. She was head of the Design Studio. Cowtan & Tout decided that they wanted the Design Studio archive maintained but the rest of the company records they didn't want. They needed to cut back on storage space and expenses. I can understand that. Jack had always kept things. One of the strengths of the company, something that he depended on, was that someone could call him and say, "Do you have this old fabric? I need to match something." They had kept more than most companies would in their studio archive. Their records and things like that, Colefax and Fowler didn't need. They were going to get rid of it all. They told Krista to dump it. She, coming from a household of museums, knew that these were important archive records. She called me one day and said, "What am I supposed to do?"

**Stephanie Zollinger:** You were in the right place at the right time!

**Lotus Stack:** We talked about it, me finding out how much it was and trying to think, where can I help? I said, "How much time do you have?" She said, "I think I have a few months." I had no desire to have the archive. It was big. Archives are not my business. I thought I can justify spending the Minneapolis Institute of Art's staff time, mine, on working on this because, if I can persuade someone to take this archive, I knew that it was an important document that could shed so much light, not only on a leading company, but on the whole period, particularly the mid-'50s. There was no other company that kept records as Larsen did. No one else had that sensibility, that time, that luxury. It was really Win Anderson who had that consciousness. Jack didn't even know he had an archive for a long time. Anyway, I thought then, if I can persuade people to take it, I knew there were some duplicates. I could get the top 75 duplicates. I could get first pick of the duplicates and bring those into the museum. I could get out of it what I needed and somebody else would have this. So, through various places I contacted, I finally made connections. A commitment was made between Larsen, motivated through Krista's actions, and Cornell University. It was going there. I was happy. They were happy. It was a teaching institution. It made sense. The head of their museum had known Larsen and had been head of Rhode Island School of Design for a long time. It was a match made in heaven. Then Krista called me one day and said that the truck was coming the next day. She had contacted Cornell and made the final arrangements. The person that I was working with, who had been a PhD graduate student from the University of Minnesota, Charlotte Jirousek, was teaching at Cornell. She went to finalize it with the museum at Cornell, who was taking the lot. She would be the advisor for all of this. Cornell suddenly realized how big it was and said they wouldn't take it. The truck was coming, all of this is happening, and time had run out! I thought, "It can't die, it can't get dumped." I asked Krista to give me 24 more hours to try to work something out. I called Lindsay Shen and she said, "We can't do this by ourselves, but it's a good fit for the university. Can we do something together to make this work? We'll both have good collections. It's a prominent thing." She went to her Department Head and Committee, I believe it was Ann Erickson who had worked here when Win Anderson was there. Now, I hadn't known that Win Anderson had taught here so it reinforced it.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** In the '50s?

**Lotus Stack:** Yes. It reinforced the connection. Ann was a tremendous influence to make it all happen. Again, it was one of those Minnesota things where people worked together. Lindsay said "yes" and I said "yes"

so it happened. We had a little bit of time until the summer before it actually got delivered. Lindsay was able to have it delivered here. Lindsay Shen and I spent hours of our time here at night going through pieces. Ann Erickson was involved. Lindsay had a little bit of money as Cowtan & Tout gave some money. We divided it up. Since the university took so much of the logistics, initially we took more money. I didn't tell my institution but we got some because I knew I needed it to hire someone to help get it sorted out.

### **Stephanie Zollinger:** Catalogued?

**Lotus Stack:** Catalogued. We had a student assistant, Angie Emeott, who was involved. We worked so hard. I remember going home bleary eyed. The agreement was made that the Minneapolis Institute of Art would get one of at least every pattern. There were many colorways in most patterns. I tried to think, with Lindsay, of some logical way of dividing it. What we decided is, each time we found a new pattern, we tried to get all the colorways together. Then she got first choice on the first round and I got second, third, and fourth. Then the next pattern, I'd get first choice. That way we could ensure each institution would get dramatic examples, plus other samples. What we found, too, were there were different production waves of the same piece. We'd end up having two greens and one had been made in Germany, one had been made in America, but the widths might be slightly different. I talked to Jack about that, saying, "You were producing the same fabric in two countries, how come?" He said it started out because of customs. It was easier to produce it in Germany. I said, "Did they do a better job?" He said, "No, actually, the Americans did a better printing job, more quality." Eventually it was cheaper to have it all done in Germany and re-imported back to the United States. They would do things like buy fabric in Italy, then ship it to Germany, then process it there, and then ship it to the United States, or ship it to Asia, depending on where it needed to be shipped. He was amazingly innovative and that took a lot of work. A lot of companies wouldn't do that because you don't get such profits. It isn't the centralizing thing but he wanted innovative. He was having fun. He knew he could get into a niche market.

Then, shortly after the university accepted this project, even before it actually arrived, Lindsay had been in touch with Alan Lathrop at the Northwest Architectural Archives. He came in on the project. It was three players, which was fantastic because there was so much paperwork that Lindsay and I hadn't counted on. Space is such a premium in the

museum. There was no way I was going to persuade somebody to do that, it would fill my office, but original designs, things like that, were just fantastic. Alan was just at a time where he was opening a new facility. We could give him some money, too, out of this. I think maybe it was \$10,000 or \$25,000 that Cowtan & Tout had given us. We divided it up. It really worked very well where the initial computerization of the fabric happened that summer with the intern at the University of Minnesota. Then I hired someone who worked for four years for us, Virginia Hjelmstad, who was the cataloguer, head of a team, and who worked with a lot of volunteers. Then, because I knew that if I didn't have this organized at the museum, it wouldn't get used, and if it wasn't seen, then it could be forgotten, or worse yet, de-accessioned, I really wanted a record. I wanted it to get out so we had enough documentation that it would be leverage for the museum that you can't de-accession this because you need the space. Inevitably, this is going to be boring for about a 25 to 40 year period. As soon as Jack dies, it will be passé. Every period, that happens. Look at William Morris. Look at all of these people. William Morris is god now in so many areas. I can almost guarantee, by 2050, Jack will be reincarnated as god and we will all look so innovative.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Well, thank you, because you were the one that was instrumental in starting the more modern archive.

**Lotus Stack:** Sometimes I think about that. It was so much work. It wasn't what I wanted to do but it was so important. I sometimes think that it had to be and I was just there at the time and place.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** It was your thoughts, it was your passion and wishes.

**Lotus Stack:** Well, in the bigger picture, hopefully. It has so much potential but that potential will not be seen in my lifetime. Maybe, at the end of your lifetime, it will be seen and revered and you'll be able to help it go on. Everything goes in cycles.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Why do you think he survived and why do you think he will be so well-known in years to come?

**Lotus Stack:** In part, he will be so well known because he was involved in so many things and had such a high profile. It's very interesting. It's how long you exist. We see the brilliant person who sparks for a few years and they have some influence. Jack survived because he was able to change with the time and there's very few textile companies, with one person, that has had such a long influence. He lasted 50 years and that's a long time.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Do you think another reason why he may have lasted is because he was curious and willing to try things, maybe they would work, maybe they wouldn't work. He wasn't just totally process-driven?

**Lotus Stack:** Absolutely. That's why he was important at the time, because he would try. I remember talking to him, after I got the archive. I went up to the cataloguing area and everyone was saying, "I think there's some mistake. This can't be a Larsen fabric." I thought, "He got out of bed on the wrong side that day." One will always be a little bit in awe of Jack but I asked him discreetly, "There are some pieces that aren't quite as strong as others. Why is this?" He said, "Of course, if you don't have failures it means you haven't been trying hard enough." In our mature periods, people are afraid to take chances. They have too much to lose. He never lost that. It was one of the things that drove presidents of the company crazy. He would take so many chances and get people going on projects that were not going to be sustainable from a profit point of view. It was also hard on the Design Studio people because they would be working with these often smaller manufacturers in some far-away country that Jack had been encouraging to go forward. They would have to deliver bad news saying, "We can't do this. We can't push this forward." The way the industry works is you don't get paid until there's production. You don't get paid for doing sampling and that kind of thing so that, sometimes was hard. That's where a lot of the big companies are very, ruthless probably isn't the right word. I don't think they're going out of their way to hurt somebody but they think in terms of the bottom line, "You either try and work with us or not but, if it doesn't work, you're history. You've just lost out but we have to move on." They try to be respectful, to keep track. They have to have good relationships with these different mills and producers but it's a tricky, tricky game. It's more intense now because things change so quickly. Jack was able to sustain a lot of these kinds of relationships. There's no question about his ability, as I referenced earlier, to move from a different look and a different way of working with people and companies. The longer I live, the more respect I have because that's a hard thing to do as you get older. You've found techniques that work



and you don't want to give those up. You want to stick with them and make them work.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Right. So he did influence us in many, many ways?

**Lotus Stack:** Absolutely. He's a good role model. That's I think his lesson. If we can keep those archives intact and gain more of an understanding. These oral histories are terrific for that, of seeing the kind of insights. If you can look at the interrelationship that he had with his own design team, and with a far-reaching community, look at the basic principles, you can learn a lot. Through the historical work that I've done, my work with Larsen really threw light on reading much older records and thinking they were dealing with this in 16th century Italy, too. Some of these same basic principles of changing market and available materials, all of these things are basic to textile production, and I'm sure to other production. That's why the archive fascinates me, not only from a textile point of view, but from a history and trade point of view, from an economics point of view, from tariffs, and how much tariffs affected things. You know, they couldn't design the fabric with more than 33 percent cotton because then it would have a whole new tariff. It would go into a whole other economic area because the duties would be much higher so they would have to price it higher. If there's a blight on cotton in Italy, on growing, then they can't get the cotton or the cotton goes up higher in price. These are issues that have been happening forever in textile manufacturing. When you look at these archives, you can see it. Having the ability to look over a 50-year period, to see what issues they're constantly dealing with, whether it's a particular of the time, is pretty remarkable.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** I know that you knew Larsen on various levels. Do you had any favorite memories that you want to share?

**Lotus Stack:** I don't have anything particular. I've known him. I've seen him at parties, talked to him, interviewed him, as you have. I've been privileged to stay at LongHouse, his Long Island home. I remember showing up one day and I had a pair of lavender shoes on. His comment is, "Oh, how unusual, lavender shoes," and all of a sudden wishing I had worn brown shoes or something. I've been very lucky. Jack can be very cutting. You're never quite sure with that particular aspect. He suffers no fools but that he was patient with me shows a kind side because I was

learning too. It's good to know because I was certainly, in the beginning, a long shot. I mean, maybe I would do something, maybe I wouldn't, in terms of textiles and developing the world. He was very encouraging. That's true of a number of people that he would be encouraging to but it wasn't a personality sort of thing, what he saw in you.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** I think, when you peel the layers away, he is a kind man that, as you said, just happens to have a little bit of an ego.

**Lotus Stack:** Yes. He uses ego well but I don't know about "kind" in relationship to Jack. It's an interesting word. I don't know. He's thoughtful. He's encouraging to something that he sees might have potential. He's willing to take a chance on that. There are not a lot of people who would take that time in investing. I think he's very good at investments, whether it's a little company, or people, or time and circumstances. I think he's very conscious in a positive sense of value and how you can leverage that out. There are few people I've met who, like him, are interesting, where they have a very compelling sense of what their vision is. They move forward with great energy. If you're in their way and you don't get out, you're going to get trampled. It's not a vindictiveness although, occasionally, if you irritate them enough, they'll come at you. There are a lot of people who needed recognition. Jack was not willing to give it to them. That was very, very hard, possibly destructive to some part of their life. That's so sad on everybody's part. I think Jack, in one sense, wasn't doing it on purpose. He was doing it from his idea of improving or keeping going.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** I understand.

**Lotus Stack:** I'm very grateful for being around people like Jack. As I say, I know few other artists that are this way because they're so different than the average kind of person that you can work out.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Maybe that's what it took to be like that.

**Lotus Stack:** I don't mean average in a diminutive way but they hear a different drummer and they march on. They make an amazing contribution. If you get stepped on along the way, and I have occasionally, you just realize that it has nothing particularly to do with me. It's their vision and going on. In a way, I'm driven by getting something done. If I

get knocked off around the turn occasionally, I don't mind so much. I just want to get done what needs to get done. I'm lucky that I have that particular trait, I think it more or less happened with my personality.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So, turning to your curator side again, what can you leave us with in terms of what you feel is Jack Lenor Larsen's greatest contribution to the textile world?

**Lotus Stack:** Well, certainly his company, but his company in relationship to what he did in terms of the greater picture of contemporary textiles. The publications, the writing that he did. How do you like this, the pushing of Jack? He brought along, with attention towards his personality, a real package of goods. Maybe that's it. A lot of people who are pushing personality get so absorbed in themselves but don't have a good product. He had a good product, longevity, the tremendous amount of energy, the ability to go beyond a narrow interiors interest to looking at contemporary fiber art, and helping a lot of people along the way.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Do you think, when he broadened his company and went into furniture and carpets, that he spread himself too thin?

**Lotus Stack:** Sure.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So he may have lasted even longer?

**Lotus Stack:** I don't know. It's a tricky business because a lot of this game is name recognition and profile. He's high-end textiles. Part of sales is being able to say, "I have a Larsen fabric on that couch" or, better yet, you, visitor, important person, recognize it as a Larsen fabric and then, by association, you know this is a cultivated person you're visiting. All of that plays into it. He certainly developed it to the hilt. Going into furniture and things of that order in retrospect certainly was a dilution or drawing himself too thin but we don't know what would have happened if he hadn't done that. He did get a broader base for a short time. He was working on the cachet of his name. If the bust of '86 didn't happen maybe it would have gone on. It was all dependent on an affluent society. That he survived is amazing and was able to retrench and keep going. At that time he must have been in his late sixties or early seventies. I can't remember when he was born right now but to pick up your shoestrings like that. Talking to

Frank Huggins, who was once president, he said something to the effect that they had no money. They had gone from a very successful company, never awash in funds but certainly quite a bit of money, to almost nothing again. What is Kipling's saying, "If you can see the things you've given, broken, and bent, and build them up again with worn-out tools." That's certainly what Jack did, that resurgence. Then look what he's doing now in a totally different field, letting it go and moving on to gardening and building up a foundation there. The guy has amazing energy. An amazing contribution. It's a contribution of a real product, his ability to change with the times, the broader outlook, and the energy to keep going.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Well, thank you very much. I appreciate this.

##### End of Lotus Stack.mp3 #####