

INTERVIEW WITH JACK LENOR LARSEN BY PATRICIA MALARCHER,  
Editor of Surface Design Journal

The name "Larsen" is synonymous with 20th century textiles. Ever since Jack Lenor Larsen, Inc. was established in 1952, the influence of its innovative, far-seeing founder has permeated the field of interior design. Ranging from filmy casement cloths to plush upholstery, from the formal geometry of complex doubleweave to the freshness of colorful organic prints, Larsen textiles have enhanced walls and floors of large company headquarters, educational institutions, jet planes, and private homes.

In the early 1970s, Larsen Carpet was established, and Larsen Furniture, a division of his company, in 1976. By applying not only 20th century design principles and textile technology, but also technical knowledge from first hand encounters with artisans all around the world, Jack Lenor Larsen has fostered awareness of the depth and richness of textile culture. As early as 1959, he went to Asia as a consultant with the U.S. State Department to help set up local craft operations, and has maintained connections with Asia since then.

Larsen designs have merited retrospective exhibitions at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Palais du Louvre, Paris; Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Museum Bellerive in Zurich, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C. In 1996 Larsen was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Surface Design Association.

In 1997, the Larsen company merged with Cowtan & Tout, the American subsidiary of Colefax and Fowler Group of London. Jack Lenor Larsen has remained a consultant to the firm and still plays a key role in design development.

Throughout his career, Larsen has kept a watchful, mentoring eye on investigations in fiber departments of schools as well as in artists' studios, and, as an author and curator, has presented new work to the public through exhibitions and books.

An autobiographical work, Jack Lenor Larsen: A Weaver's Memoir, was published by Harry N. Abrams in 1998. The following interview with Patricia Malarcher, Editor of the Surface Design Journal, took place in New York last fall.

Patricia Malarcher: According to legend, you originated the term, "surface design."  
Jack Lenor Larsen: I don't think so. I don't like the term.

PM: What would you prefer?

JLL: Fabric embellishment.

PM: The Surface Design Association started with a conference in the mid-1970s, which was about the time of your book and exhibition, *The Dyer's Art*. Was there a connection?

JLL: The Surface Design conference came just before *The Dyer's Art*, but I spoke to that subject at the conference.

PM: At the time, calling attention to dyeing went against the dominant emphasis on constructed textiles.

JLL: It wasn't just dyeing, it was also quilting and embroidery, shibori, patterned knits...

PM: All those weren't represented in your book, were they?

JLL: No; *The Dyer's Art* was on the resists, which came into their own after the book came out. The thing is, in the modern movement, from the '30s forward, embellished surfaces were out of favor. Exhibits and the press and books were all focused on woven fabrics. Then, some of those who were involved with embellished fabrics thought it would be interesting to see what was going on with that. They expected 200 at the Surface Design conference and over 600 came. They realized there is strength in numbers, and that they were more important than they thought. Paul Smith did an art to wear show about 18 months after the first surface design conference. Of 25 artists, only two were weavers; the rest were doing surface design. That's how quickly it became dominant.

PM: You're one of those who led the way for contemporary textiles. What were some important turning points for you?

JLL: Knowing Dorothy Liebes, Anni Albers, Marianne Strengel, Ed Rossbach, being in Asia early on, owning a mill and a design studio, working with industry. I realized what a hard time corporations have, and how unprogressive many of them are. That encouraged me to use the flexibility I had as an entrepreneur and do things differently. We've worked in 60 countries, many of them in the third world, with handcraft traditions and skills.

PM: Your company came up with some radical ideas, like printing on velvet.

JLL: That wasn't the company, that was my chief designer. We knew about stenciled velvet as a technique, but it took a long time to get the velvet short enough to dye all the pile. Another innovation was doing a first production of batiks and ikats and fold dyes. Most of those had only been done in two meter lengths as skirts; we did them at least 100 yards at a time which is quite different. In our fields, goods are sold from samples, so when somebody orders from a five year old sample and expects it to be on time and exactly the same, that is a challenge.

PM: In your memoirs there is a picture of a fabric that was inspired by Gustav Klimt. Have many Larsen designs been influenced or inspired by artists?

JLL: There's no painting like that fabric, but it still is definitely Klimt's handwriting. For Midsummer, our first print that was enormously successful, I took Matisse and Tiffany images to my draftsman and it's somewhere between the two. We used to work for a year on those drawings.

PM: Is the fabric based on Matisse reproduced in your memoirs?

JLL: No, but it was our most popular fabric, and also the most copied-it came out just before the copyright law, and we collected 42 copies. One year three big swimsuit rivals all used it in their ads.

PM: You wrote that gardening is one of your great pleasures. Has that also influenced your designs?

JLL: Yes.

PM: Could you give some examples?

JLL: In the book there's a carpet, red and green, called Fantasy. I was looking up through a red maple tree and realizing how rich the color was; the leaves were red and green in the same value. My question was, can I weave that? We did it in silk and we did it in carpeting-I call the colorways "macédoine." The carpet is in the lobby of the Joyce Theater here in New York.

I've been playing with complements in the same value, like very pale lavenders with golds, realizing that early 20th century French paintings also used complements of the same value a great deal. I see the same thing in a garden. I like a complementary element, not just a play of close colors like yellows and oranges.

I find that in both fabrics and gardens, a light or dark accent, like white, often is the right one. People often think a color should be the accent, but using lights or darks is less difficult.

PM: You started working with devoré a long time ago, and now it seems to be everywhere. Is that something you researched yourself?

JLL: It started in France when a company south of Lyon invited about 50 or 100 Americans for a weekend to learn about it. It didn't catch on very well. But we had a French agent that we worked with on experiments in the early 1960s.

PM: Are you still designing for the Larsen Company?

JLL: Yes, definitely.

PM: You've been an innovator in the textile industry, and at the same time you've kept abreast of the studio fiber movement. Do you see a relationship between those areas?

JLL: In 1960 I did a big exhibition, *Fabrics International*, in which I was deploring the backwardness of textiles, the slowness of weaving, and that it produced only yard goods, which is only raw material, while scarves, sweaters, stockings were finished products. I thought that's how we should move, toward full-fashioned knits, or felt, where there's no waste. And I also was envisioning art fabrics as being dimensional. The loom was developed very late to make fabrics more uniform and more quickly. I asked those who wanted to do exhibition work, why do it on a loom? Think of basketry and fish traps, interlaced houses, and freedom. Think of yourself as a spider! Think of cocoons and hornets' nests, all those natural fabrics that are so beautiful and not just flat. What I was commending to industry and to artist weavers was exactly the same thing.

PM: Was your advice followed?

JLL: No. Industry's still not there. I think about the nature of thermoplastic fibers, stretched, puckered, and so forth. All stockings are made exactly the same size and then put over forms and heated until they're small, medium or large. That's using thermoplastic creatively. We've come the full round-dimensional fabrics proved to be very difficult in terms of cleaning and hanging and so forth, but the show was an exciting breakthrough.

PM: In what way?

JLL: Within months the artist craftsmen could respond to this challenge and send back large, fairly well studied pieces. They have this ability to turn on a dime and realize something so quickly. Industry, even if it wants to, takes years.

PM: Where was the exhibition?

JLL: It started at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art [now the University of the Arts]-I was head of fibers there-and came to the Craft Museum, then it traveled all over America, including Cranbrook.

PM: You've written of your love for classification. Has that been reflected in your patterns of collecting?

JLL: Yes, I fill in.

PM: For instance?

JLL: My favorite artist is Wharton Esherick, the furniture maker from Philadelphia. Through a small inheritance I was just able to buy his two masterpieces. I may have now the second largest Esherick collection, but I don't have anything by Sam Maloof. At one time when I moved to New York I had to buy a winter coat. That became so much fun that I started collecting coats when I really needed suits.

I think what got me onto classification more than anything else was the Munsell color system. Munsell did a globe to which you could attach every color; the grayer it was, the closer it was to the center. Suddenly, all of color became a system. The more you saw, the more you could fill in. It was like geography, where you have cities, rivers, mountains, countries, continents, and the more you learn the more complete it becomes. I found that one could do that with weaves and all kinds of things. If you don't, the more words you hear the more confused you become. Classification reverses that process and lets you understand the overview. My books are intended to be overviews.

PM: Are you doing another book?

JLL: Not now, but I've just worked on two, one about stripes in everything-nature, textiles, color decor-they're absolutely primal. What I'm actively working on is classification for decorative works. Fine arts and architecture are listed by creator or school. In decorative arts, historically, we don't know the creator, so that

museums number decorative objects by day of acquisition which means nothing within one institution and even less from one museum to another. My collection of less than 3000 pieces has all the warp ikats together and all the warp ikats with supplementary wefts together, and so on. Suddenly you see relationships in how American warp ikats differ from European and Asian ones. My foundation<sup>1</sup> is having a colloquium this November [1998] so top curators from around North America can help sort this out and carry it further.

PM: Will the proceedings be accessible to the public?

JLL: We are going to do a plain paper summary, 1000 copies, once we get through the first hurdle. The idea is that eventually this will become a scholar's book.

PM: Would it be similar to Irene Emory's Primary Structures of Textiles?

JLL: Yes, it's based on that. In her book she said somebody should carry this further into basketry and lace, based on elements like her classification, so I ran down [to the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.] to see Irene and we talked it out until she died. I proposed some changes in my Interlacing book, such as that doublecloth is two sets of elements over two sets of elements; she classifies it as four sets of elements.

PM: You've written that during your academic period you were interested in learning about a relationship between truth and beauty and their emanation from the same source. Do you still think about that?

JLL: I do think about it, even in gardens and woods. There are exceptions, but most of the time a very healthy tree is also a very beautiful tree, and I constantly try to ask why. When I see something I really respond to, why do I respond to it? I try to find that out. I grew up in the Northwest where there were millions of trees crowded together, but the first trees I loved were the live oaks in California which are one to a mile but become precious and sculptural in relation to similar forms in the hills.

When I was an undergraduate I was fairly religious and spiritual, and sometimes felt torn about those who entered monasteries and didn't have all the distractions and ego problems that young people have. But other times I've been so stirred by something, that it would also seem divine, as if there was an absolute. When I was about 30, it seemed to me that maybe the design movement was just a commercial phenomenon. Then I heard Eero Saarinen talk on Angkor Wat, and I realized there's a place beyond selling and designing fabrics. At LeCorbusier's chapel at

Ronchamps, where it's so dark you can't see the 13 altars the first few times, I had the same reaction. Why was this making more of an impression on me than Chartres, which is so much more complex and venerable? Its being of our time was very important.

PM: After being so many places and looking at so many different things, how do you keep your vision fresh so that you can always respond to something new?

JLL: I hate repeating myself, and owning my own business, I've been able to resist that. I keep doing something that I don't know how to do yet, like designing for a new material or a new process. The silk weavers in Thailand and Korea have successfully introduced linen, which means that we can do sheers, which we couldn't do in silk. They have handcraft techniques that the mills don't have, and all you need to weave linen is high humidity. So we've come up with some very new things.

PM: You've been involved in developing the collection at the Craft Museum, and wasn't there a basket collection for the Erie Museum?

JLL: That was fun. They asked me what a small museum with a limited budget could collect and use for a traveling show. That was about twelve years ago, when basketry was in ascendance, and I said, "Baskets."

PM: Your memoirs refer to many people you consider your mentors. Have you been a mentor to anyone?

JLL: I didn't set out to be but I was very concerned. When I was in school and at the beginning of my career there were so many famous designers who contributed largely like Charles Eames, Anni Albers, Dorothy Liebes, and so on. Then suddenly industries became organized and things became more commercial and I wondered who students could look up to and emulate. My answer was that I'd better do that for them.

Oh, two things I did that I am very proud of were to start a college of fellows for the American Craft Council, and an awards program that gives gold medals. I was active with a decorators group, ASID, and with AIA, who were my clients. They have fellows that get gold medals, so I couldn't imagine why we wouldn't have them.

PM: Where do you see textiles now in relation to the rest of the craft world?

JLL: I see American textiles as relatively healthier in that there are entrepreneurs in between a single worker and Burlington. There are more or less steps all the way from one person in a small studio to a studio with a few power looms to a small mill and there's some communication up and down-not much, but some. Whereas, when you think of American ceramics or glass, there's almost none of that. Textiles are never thought of as well off but we're a little better off because of that.

PM: With the emergence of computer technology in textiles, do you see a continuing need for work by hand?

JLL: I think that working in the medium is very useful even if you know the technology. Some composers occasionally have to go to a piano and plunk something out, and I'm that way with weaves. When I explain to apprentices that we're looking for, I can show them more easily than I can tell them. But when I'm not working with an assistant and doing the mechanical part myself, the discovery is richer.

PM: At this point, Is there anything you'd like to say to surface designers?

JLL: Maybe it's to think about the next step. Because I studied architecture, I always think of fabrics in terms of interior spaces. Surface designers as a group would be well served to think of the use of the fabric they're doing, and who are their clients for that use. If it's for apparel, how is it going to look after it's gone around the world and been cleaned a few times? Think of the life of the fabric. How is it going to sew? Will it bag? How will it move with the body? Fabric finishing is important. There are some good collaborations between Seventh Avenue designers and surface designers.

PM: Who, for example?

JLL: Mary McFadden, perhaps more than anybody. She not only knows how to sew fabric and cut it, but also how to sell it.