

Jack Lenor Larsen Oral History Project: Interview with David McFadden

Stephanie Zollinger: This is Stephanie Zollinger. It is Thursday, February 18, 2010, and I'm here at the Museum of Art and Design with David McFadden. Once again, I want to thank you for meeting with me today.

David McFadden: Thank you.

Stephanie Zollinger: Before we start talking about the work of Jack Lenor Larsen, perhaps you could fill us in a little bit in terms of your design background, where you grew up, and where you went to school?

David McFadden: I basically grew up in the Twin Cities area and attended the University of Minnesota, where I majored in Art History, completing both undergraduate and graduate degrees. While I was at the university working on my master's degree, I went over to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) and offered to work there as a volunteer. That led to a job in part-time research, then to Assistant Curatorship and, ultimately, to the Curatorship of Decorative Arts. So I've always been involved with three-dimensional materials. At that point in time there were only two of us in the whole department and Decorative Arts was extremely broadly defined. It included not only all the European American furniture, ceramics, and glass, but it included the entire textile collection. It included all the ancient and classical material, it included the art of the Americas, and the Asian collections, believe it or not.

Stephanie Zollinger: That is a huge collection today!

David McFadden: It's huge! They've all hived off into great departments but at that point, it was a very small staff. I started specializing in Decorative Arts and then, in 1978, moved to New York to become the Curator of Decorative Arts at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, part of the Smithsonian Institution. I was there for 16 years. I organized a lot of exhibitions. There was a Department of Textiles with its own curator. I was not as involved with textiles, except as we collaborated on shows.

Stephanie Zollinger: When you were studying Art History and went on to get your master's degree, what was your emphasis or your specialty?

David McFadden: I did a double graduate degree. I did Renaissance Baroque Art History, which seemed to be the choice of the moment, and then I completed a second master's in Chinese Political History of the Ming Dynasty, because I've always been fascinated by China. In fact, when I worked at the MIA, part of the thrill was being able to work with the Chinese Imperial Robes, which are splendid. All of that fed into my interest in Decorative Arts.

Stephanie Zollinger: Once you arrived in New York, when did you first notice the work of Jack Lenor Larsen, or how did you get to know about it?

David McFadden: When I was at Cooper-Hewitt, Jack Larsen was frequently there. He came to see all of our exhibitions. He was very involved in various projects. He sat on committees for various benefits. Then he became the Chairman of my Decorative Arts Association. I formed a support group, a friends' group, and he was Chair for several years. Jack and I spent a lot of time together. I got to know his textiles fairly well. Then, when I moved to my current museum in 1997, there was the Museum of American Craft and he was very involved on the board there so that brought us even closer. Then I realized that, at the Craft Museum, over those years, we had collected almost no textiles by Jack. I set out to rectify that. The first thing I did was to meet with Jack and pull together a really great sampling of what he'd done over the years, so that we had documentary pieces in that museum. Then, as we got together more and more frequently, he started talking about the idea of a retrospective show and I was very enthusiastic about that. We gave it a slightly different twist because we not only showed his textiles but we showed what he collected around it, to see where the correspondence is and where the differences were. In short, how his eye worked as a collector and as a designer.

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you. Since you've worked so closely with Jack, what adjectives would you use to describe his work?

David McFadden: I think inventive probably comes to mind first because he's been very clever at taking a fiber, or a technique, and inventing

something new to do with it. So quality comes up first. Then I think the second part is standards. He has very high standards of quality, not only in the choice of the materials but, definitely, in the execution of each fabric. Ultimately, how it's going to serve its purpose. He thinks a lot about how a textile is going to be used. It's not designing in the air, so to speak. He really thinks about wall coverings, window coverings, furnishing coverings, and how fabrics can interact with parts of our daily life.

Stephanie Zollinger: I know he's very creative with his work. You know how interior design works, a lot of designers have to deal with codes such as flammability. Do you know if that impacted certain avenues or directions that he took?

David McFadden: I'm sure it eventually did. I don't know the specific instances, but I don't think there's a textile company alive that doesn't have to go through all of those requirements and meet them. And they are very stringent. Jack had one great plus in his early designs, he, like Dorothy Liebes, experimented with synthetic fibers. I think that opened up new worlds to him because a lot of synthetics you can automatically assume meet the flameproof requirements. Jack was a real innovator in using those materials, too.

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes, he was. From a curator's point of view, can you address his contribution to modern textiles and how it impacted interior design as well as architectural design?

David McFadden: I think in Jack's period, when he really came into prominence in the '50s, the world of textiles really was in two camps, and they were quite separate. One was the studio artist. The Claire Zeislars, the Katherine Westphals, who made independent works of art. They were weaving, they were embroidering, they were doing those sorts of things, but it was considered one-off. When someone thought about textile design and production, you thought about those vast mills cranking out miles of textiles and somehow, in that process, losing the connection with the hand. Jack was very concerned from the outset to marry the hand tradition with contemporary production. It was bringing the world of traditional textiles into the 20th century and saying, there is a marriage that can be affected between production and craftsmanship. I think, if it's the one thing he did, it was to teach the industry that they could have textiles that had the feel and the look of handmade but it could be made in

sufficient amounts to meet the ever-growing market in America for interior fashions. Then, I think, Jack really appealed to the interior design profession at that point because, in the '50s, into the '60s, handmade objects were really important as part of this. After the war it was getting back to basics, to things that were reassuring, and traditional, and homelike. Certainly handmade textiles had that feel. So I think he, again, came along at just the right moment. He helped to shape that period but he was also fortunate in that the world around him was ready for it.

Stephanie Zollinger: And he really was global before there was such a thing as being global. To get that hand quality, he really had to do a lot of travel and find the sources that could produce what he was looking for.

David McFadden: Absolutely, and never lose touch with the fact that he studied as a weaver. And he kept weaving. A lot of his experiments were carried out on the loom. He would work out a system, a technique, a color-patterning, based on his knowledge of what was going on worldwide. But he always brought himself back into it as the craftsman, as well as the designer.

Stephanie Zollinger: It's interesting that you say that textiles in the early '50s was broken into two camps. He hired Paul Gedeohn, who is a studio artist. I think it's interesting because he does have a side of his line that, in my opinion, addresses the studio arts.

David McFadden: Definitely, absolutely. You think of even the early classic pieces, *Remoulade*, which everyone cites. It's really about a hand-woven fabric and you don't lose that feel when you see it because it's so richly textural. Your hand automatically goes out to touch it. You want that response, that tactile response.

Stephanie Zollinger: And I think color, too, is a part that draws you in.

David McFadden: Right, and Jack was always, and always has been, and still is today, a passionate learner. That's why the travels around the world. It was not just to find places to produce things. He was always getting new information and new ideas that he could take back to the process.

Stephanie Zollinger: Am I right in this? I've been trying to, as I've been talking to people, work this component piece out. The mills, during the time that Larsen was working with them, didn't have a person like Jack on staff. He would work with the mills. They would learn from him and he would learn from them. But today, what he was doing would not really be possible because now they have people like Jack on staff. Is that right?

David McFadden: Well, they have more designers and, in many cases, named designers. The people that worked for the textile companies prior to that time were pretty much anonymous. It was house design. And so, no matter who the creative genius was, it was absorbed under the name of the manufacturer. So I think the idea of the designer rising to the surface and becoming a known element in that production was really important, and Larsen called his company "Larsen" right at the outset. It wasn't, "Furnishing Textiles, Inc.," or something. He used his own name so he reinforced this idea that there was a working craftsman designer at the helm.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right, and I believe he was also one of the first designers to license lines?

David McFadden: He could well have been. I can't attest to that but I think you're right. Very early on.

Stephanie Zollinger: We talked a little bit about some of his ground-breaking achievements. Can you be more specific on what he's done technically to change the world of textiles?

David McFadden: Well, as I say, I come back to this idea of making production pieces that still retain the feel of the handmade. I think that's really important. The experiments with specific things. Finding a new material that had not necessarily even been used for textiles.

Stephanie Zollinger: The stretch fabrics?

David McFadden: The stretch fabrics. The fabric called *Cumulus* and the ones that were made of a kind of extruded plastic. Suddenly making that into a textile was a wonderful break and a move forward. I think that kind of invention and creativity is really important. The other thing that I

would say about Jack, his textiles, some of those really early patterns, have never lost their appeal. I think that's a real testament to the quality of the design. People still see them as having a fresh contemporary look, even if the design is now 40 years old.

Stephanie Zollinger: I had read somewhere or heard somewhere that when Jack came on the scene and started to produce his lines, interior designers were just thrilled but then they couldn't work out, "How do I use this piece of material?" So he literally had to go and show designers and architects what they could do with the fabrics that he had designed.

David McFadden: And you know his slightly older colleague, Dorothy Liebes, was in many respects in the same boat, because she ended up designing interesting settings for her textiles such as automobile interiors and theater curtains. Jack also did the same thing, finding a place for a new textile. That kind of large commission sent his career in motion when he did the Lever House installation. I think that attitude about interacting with architecture is another distinctive thread in his entire career. The way in which Jack recognized that 20th century architecture was primarily an architecture of glass, which meant that it was an architecture of light. Controlling, and manipulating, and maximizing the light, either through shading or through sheers, that was really important. I think that was a major contribution that Jack made.

Stephanie Zollinger: I think *Interplay* was one of the results of that issue.

David McFadden: Absolutely. So you had privacy but, nevertheless, the light could come through. That was important. Nobody had done that.

Stephanie Zollinger: If you were to curate a show, and you maybe have already done this.

David McFadden: I did!

Stephanie Zollinger: With just a handful of Larsen textiles, which fabrics would those be, and why?

David McFadden: That's a very tough question because you can look at it from so many points of view. If I were going to say something in a very small selection of things what Jack is about, it would first of all include samples of these varying materials. So it's not only the wool, and silks, and cottons, but the synthetics, the Sarans, the Mylars, whatever he's using. I would certainly use some of his kind of space-age materials, whether it be that extruded vinyl material, whatever it was. And then things like *Wholly Cow*, in which he took leather and wove it into strips, using yet another material in the textile that had been used as a furniture covering but not really used as a textile. I think that kind of shift. *Remoulade* would be there as a kind of lynchpin. Certainly some of the sheers would be there. I would say *Wholly Cow* for certain and then I'm very fond of *Cumulus*, which we've had on view here for some time. When we opened our building, in fact, we chose that as one of the textiles to feature from Jack because it related so much to our building, which, in this new guise, is really about light, and the interaction of light in the environment.

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you. On some other notes, you've known Jack for many years, and you've worked with him. Are there any stories that you would like to share? He's a very colorful man! Have you attended any of his parties?

David McFadden: Oh, absolutely! I'm trying to think of them. The parties are always interesting because Jack knows such interesting people so, if Jack has a gathering of any kind, you know it's going to be an interesting mix. They're going to be people who are major figures in their field, there's going to be young people and young talent. I think one of the things that Jack has done throughout his career, which I would say anecdotally is another important contribution, is being supportive of young artists. He collects their work. He has always done that. He believes in buying for your collection with your heart and with your eye but he also knows that, for someone who's just starting out in their career, having someone like Jack purchase something by them means a lot, because they've really passed the first hump they have to get over.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right.

David McFadden: So, in terms of stories, Jack has always had a fantastic sense of humor and he is a *bon vivant*. He loves talking about his travels and where he's been, and mostly about where he's going next.

Even today, you talk to him and say, “What are you up to, Jack?” He’ll say, “I’m leaving in three days for Japan, then I go to Egypt, and then I’m going to Southeast Asia, and then I’ve got a trip to Australia.” It’s like he never stops. He’s the Energizer Bunny® of textiles.

Stephanie Zollinger: He really is! You know, I’ve talked to lots of people and they’ve mentioned that when they worked with Larsen in the studio, the things that they admired most or looked forward to were some of the Christmas parties. There’s been parties that they attended where he dictated white top and black pants, so that for everyone it was the surroundings and not what people were wearing.

David McFadden: Right, exactly. I didn’t go to any of those. I heard about those myself, too. It’s like being the choreographer of an event. He was always there as the designer. He would design how people fit into an environment. I think that’s one of the reasons that he’s always stayed very close to our museum, too, because the people that we show, that we collect, are the people that Jack grew up with, sometimes nurtured. He collected works by many of these people and he’s become an historical phenomenon because of it. In another two years we’re doing an exhibition called *Craft Revolution*. The show will look at American studio craft between 1945 and 1969. Of course, Jack’s role in there is of critical importance, not only as an artist that we’re representing but as an advisor, because he lived through that era. His personal recollections of everybody from the '50s onward have been invaluable.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right, and he has a very strong memory.

David McFadden: Definitely.

Stephanie Zollinger: The other thing I’m impressed with, and I’ve heard through numerous stories, is that one of his strengths was being a self-promoter.

David McFadden: He’s very good at it, absolutely.

Stephanie Zollinger: He really got out there and met with people.

David McFadden: Definitely.

Stephanie Zollinger: The advertising pieces that he did, which could also be considered an art within.

David McFadden: It's true. Jack has always been a very effective marketer of his own things. A lot of designers aren't able to do that. A lot of them need marketing people around them to create this aura of who the designer is. Jack did it himself. His assistants were more back-up rather than leading him onto the next stage that he had to go to. He knew where he was going and yet he has always been extremely gregarious. He has no qualms about meeting anybody at any place, at any time, and can engage people easily in conversation. I think that all paid off. When you say "self-promoter and marketer" that doesn't have a negative connotation in my book. It's really you have to do that to succeed.

Stephanie Zollinger: You're right.

David McFadden: Otherwise, no one's going to know you're there.

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes, and that was a quality that I admire. I was surprised that, coming out of school and working in design firms in the early '80s, I had always known the name Jack Lenor Larsen but didn't realize it was really Jack that was behind all of it. It's amazing that he could still maintain his work in terms of studio but yet then go out and work to get his name out there.

David McFadden: Definitely, definitely. I think he probably has done more public appearances than a lot of people. Now it's kind of *de rigueur*. Designers and architects think that's part of their role, that they must be out there, on stage, at all times. It was not as true then. People were much more reclusive and low-key, off the public radar screen. Jack did help to change that. He really made the public aware that he existed.

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes, and then you see that passion and you see that involvement when he's out there working with people and talking about his work.

David McFadden: As I say, he's always been a great mentor for that reason. I've heard him talking to young ceramicists, or glass-makers, or weavers, or whoever, and he's very straight-forward with them. He's very comfortable being critical but he's also the first to be very positive and supportive if something deserves it. I think, for the young designers, the young artists, it may be a little bit difficult to deal with at first but most of them come around and realize that it was the right thing to hear at the right time.

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes. Can you talk about some of his other innovative projects that he worked on? I know that, I think it was in the '60s, they did a wax resist, I think for the batiks, and had a certain machine or operating system that no one else seemed to have at the time?

David McFadden: That I'm not sure. Technically I'm not the right person to talk to in terms of that kind of technology. When I did the exhibition on his history, as a collector, as a designer, it was really more based on the aesthetics of where he was going. The technical part of that I left to incredible scholars like Lotus Stack and others, who were really able to get into the nitty-gritty of every detail. I am not a textile weaver. I know how to iron and sew a button on and that's it! I don't know anything else, except I think I can recognize the weaves, or the general ones, but that's as far as it goes.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you have any involvement at all with Win Anderson?

David McFadden: No, I did not, unfortunately.

Stephanie Zollinger: I know she was another backbone behind the Larsen name.

David McFadden: Absolutely. Her name appeared all the time and was part of that whole cadre of people around him, but I never met her.

Stephanie Zollinger: I'm trying to think of other things that he's done in terms of things like the stretch fabrics, which I know are coming back today.

David McFadden: Well, I think like when he worked with the designer Pierre Paulin, the French designer, with the furniture. It was very much that organic design moment, where things were very curvilinear and very lush. And for Paulin, being a real sculptor in that sense, Jack's fabrics were just perfect. They were the right '60s combination of this shape, this kind of modernist space-age shape, and then Jack's brilliant colors, and patterns, and forms that complemented the organic shapes of the chairs.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right. His fabrics could fit the contours, which many others probably could not.

David McFadden: Definitely. I think again, as I say, the variety of fibers he worked with also made that possible because, when he realized what stretch fabric could do, he immediately found an application for it by working with furniture designers.

Stephanie Zollinger: Do you think that was influenced through fashion?

David McFadden: In part. You can't really pry the whole history of fashion away from what happens in the textile industry because, inevitably, even if you're thinking of interior design, the correspondence between fashion and interiors is there in every single period.

Stephanie Zollinger: They played off one another.

David McFadden: Definitely, definitely.

Stephanie Zollinger: He looked to fashion and fashion probably looked to him.

David McFadden: I think fashion, also, became known in terms of developing Jack as a colorist because, again, I think his sense of color is extraordinary. He brought a huge talent to that area. The moment that he was living through was all about color and these new color combinations. I remember seeing for the first time back in the '60s colors that were *verboten* to be used together. You don't use black and brown together, never. You don't use green and blue together. Then, suddenly, all of those rules went out of the window. Jack certainly took advantage of that

moment. Some of the really interesting experiments were early-on contradictions to what had been the rule of design, whether it be in fashion or interiors.

Stephanie Zollinger: He pushed the limits. You mentioned that you were working with Jack when he did the Indian collection which had to do with the influence of the American Indian?

David McFadden: Well, I did two shows called *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation* but Jack was not involved curatorially in those.

Stephanie Zollinger: There was a collection where he went to the museum, I understand, to study the work of American Indians, the Eskimos, and created a collection that was based on that. *Indian Paintbrush* is one of the pieces.

David McFadden: It could have been before my time. I think it probably was before my time because the two Native American shows that were done when we were on 53rd Street were called *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation*. These were people who were breaking tradition, native artists who were really experimenting and saying, "We no longer have to play by the rules." I think you're thinking of an earlier incarnation of that.

Stephanie Zollinger: I must be. Anything else that you think that we need to address in terms of Jack's contribution and scholarship?

David McFadden: No, I think, across the board, Jack, if you know anything about textiles in the 20th century, you know who he is. I think that probably sums it up. He's one of those legendary names. When people meet him they're stunned. A lot of people say, "I remember 40 years ago I had this fabric in my house." For anyone who's sensitive to this whole idea of textiles having a cultural history, as well as a technical and artistic one, I think he is very much a part of that. So I'd sum him up as a great force!

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you.

David McFadden: Thank you.

Stephanie Zollinger: I have one more question. Can you address his other work? I know he had Larsen Carpets and he had Larsen Furniture. They didn't reach the peak that his fabrics did, or the acclaim. Are you able to address that?

David McFadden: I think he was so well-known for the fabrics it's sometimes hard to make the transition into another mode of thinking. Carpet design is very different than textile design, even though you'd think they'd be identical. That's why people like Stephanie Odegard today, who's doing carpet design, has really focused on that. She hasn't tried to turn that into textiles and say, "Oh, it's just the same thing. I'll move it into another mode." I think Jack had pretty much set the main path. The floor coverings are beautiful. Some of them are absolutely fantastic. Some of the sisal things he was doing and similar have the same quality that he brought to his textiles but it really was the textiles that endeared him to designers.

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you very much.

David McFadden: Thank you.

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