

Jack Lenor Larsen Oral History Project: Interview with Krista Stack

Stephanie Zollinger: This is Wednesday, May 20, 2009, and I'm here visiting with Krista Stack Pawar.

Krista Stack: Just Stack, Krista Stack.

Stephanie Zollinger: Krista's going to begin with a little background information as to where she grew up, some of the influences she had growing up, perhaps via her mother, who was involved in the arts. Then she'll go on to talk about where she went to college and so forth.

Krista Stack: I grew up in Minneapolis and have always done textiles. The classic story in my home is when my sister was four and I was two. She got a loom for Christmas and she got bored after a month. My mom found me one day and I had woven a couple of inches on the loom at two years old. So my story is that I started to weave when I was two. I just had a propensity, an interest, in those things. I was always very manually dexterous. When my sister got to school they said, "Oh, she's very manually dexterous." My mom said, "No, she's not. Her sister is." She was fine, but I was very good. My fingers were always doing that kind of thing. Because of my mother being in the arts and in the textile arts, we had a loom in our living room. We had a potter's wheel in the kitchen. I made my own clothes, sewing when I was six and seven years old. I was never so much interested in the fine arts or the high arts, it was much more from a craft basis, from doing hands-on things. When my mom and I went to galleries or walked through the museum it would be a way to look at things, of playing a game, such as, "How was this made?" I was interested in the structure, if it was, for example, a tapestry weave.

Stephanie Zollinger: Having your mom as the textile curator at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, I'm sure she was able to teach you quite a bit and to explain some of the techniques.

Krista Stack: She was definitely able to. I think, though, that she was trying not to push the ideas on me too much. There was a tapestry at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. I remember it distinctly because there are bunny rabbits on it. There are bunny rabbits that talk to the birds. Then,

there's a little deer, so it was definitely a child's perspective. It wasn't that she had the concept of educating me in textile arts. She would have to go to a gallery opening because it was within her job to be aware of things and her kids would go with her. I was exposed to a lot of things by chance. Saturday, they were washing tapestries, and Saturday, I was with her. So we'd go wash tapestries at the museum and things like that. I did have a definite interest, more than my sister. My sister did many of those things but never followed it in that way. I knew Jack Lenor Larsen textiles from quite an early age and I really loved them. There was a woman, I'm trying to remember her name right now, but she worked at the International Design Center. She was in contact with my mother and she was the representative for Jack Larsen. She had samples. I remember specifically a yarn, a color woven with what would be called a yarn-dyed textile. There were different colored yarns in the warp and different colored yarns in the weft. Two colors in the warp and two colors in the weft. It was printed with bleach and then printed with color over those spaces. I remember saying, "Well, the yarns are colored but it has a print on it, how did they do this?" They were doing such interesting combinations of things whereas other fabrics were cotton voile printed, so it was much more straightforward. Jack Larsen was combining structure and graphics in interesting ways.

Stephanie Zollinger: So he was pushing the edge and you were curious with what he was doing?

Krista Stack: Yes. I could tell, at ten years old, that these fabrics were different than other people's. Because I was exposed to them, I was able to see the fabrics in the market in that way.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you know at ten that you always wanted to work with Jack Larsen? Was that your goal?

Krista Stack: It's kind of funny, actually, my goal was to be a secretary in the Larsen Studio!

Stephanie Zollinger: You did not set the bar very high.

Krista Stack: No. I didn't think that a secretary was a demeaning role in any way. I didn't think that I had the artistic aspect. The fine arts and

artists are people who paint and who have art as a capital "A", *Art*. I couldn't do that. I knew I couldn't do that. But I could do the kind of work behind it, the background work. I knew that I was and have always been very strong academically. I knew that I could type and I knew I could do paperwork.

Stephanie Zollinger: Write letters.

Krista Stack: Yes. I could write letters and communicate with mills that were all over the world. I thought it would be a way to be part of that studio and, when I was in high school on a trip to New York, I visited the studio. I saw Jack fly by. I don't even know who was there but I walked in through the studio. Another classic story of my family is that in tenth grade, in high school, everybody had to write a research paper on an American. Many of my friends picked Carnegie or the Americans that founded America. I picked Jack Larsen and I wrote a research paper on him. And I wrote to him, and I spelled his name wrong.

Stephanie Zollinger: S-O-N?

Krista Stack: I wrote, "S-O-N," and he wrote me back a very nice letter that said, "I am a Dane, not a Swede," as well as a huge packet of publicity of magazine articles. All of my research was mailed to me by Jack Larsen and it was great. That made a strong impression on me. I distinctly had that linear connection but you don't necessarily think, when you're living in Minnesota and you're fifteen years old, that that's going to mean that you actually get to work there. Then, when I went to school, my parents encouraged me not to go to an art school. Both of them went to art schools and were trained in the arts. My father's a musician and my mother was actually trained in studio arts. She felt that it limited their future chances. They felt that a liberal arts education would have given them a stronger grounding, or would give me a stronger grounding. I was completely fine with that because I didn't think I'd ever get into art school. I didn't think of myself as an artist with a portfolio. I liked to weave, and I liked to sew, and I liked to make bowls and ceramics. I liked to do crafts but that's a totally different thing than the arts in that sense. So I never applied to RISD (Rhode Island School of Design) but I applied to Brown because I knew you could cross register at RISD.

Stephanie Zollinger: You create your own curriculum?

Krista Stack: Right. It's a little bit of a joke. My backup was this Ivy League school so that I could take classes at the art school next door. I got in and I went to Brown, and I have a History Degree from Brown. I have to say that I actually agree with my parents' assumption about the skills that I learned in terms of research and analysis, and those things, and life experience, too. I spent my junior year abroad in Italy. The RISD curriculum makes it much more difficult to take a year out of a studio training program. I actually spent five years in Providence. I graduated from Brown in four years, with one year out in the middle, and then I stayed an extra year to finish the RISD program. I did the RISD program from the bottom to the top but only in weaving. I started with the basic print class, which is Repeats. That was something that you were required to take. I said, "I'm not interested in prints but I'll do what I have to." I did it, and it was a great foundation. Obviously, for jacquard, you need to understand prints. I did the Weaving I, Weaving II, Dobby Weaving, Jacquard Weaving, and then a project at the end. That was a fantastic experience. Before I got to RISD, I knew how to weave velvets, I knew how to weave double-weave, I knew technically how to do all of those things but I had no grasp of the concept behind it or an artistic process.

Stephanie Zollinger: The principles and elements of design?

Krista Stack: Principles and elements. When I was in high school I took a class called Design Process Color at the University of Minnesota. I had taken Color and I learned about gradation. I learned about even balance of color. From design principles, I knew balance and those kinds of things. But, I think, the critical thing that they teach at RISD is an idea or an emotion translated into a thing. That aspect of the arts is critical. In one of your very first weaving classes you're allowed to choose something from the natural world or something. You could choose water, for example. That's the critical thing. Then, with these techniques that you learn in weaving, how can you interpret water?

Stephanie Zollinger: So that's your concept.

Krista Stack: Exactly. Taking some concept, and working with that concept, and then going down a path with that concept, and getting blockaded, and taking two steps back, and going down another path with the same concept, and trying to roll it over, and trying to work through it to get something. At the very end result, somebody may not have any idea

what your initial concept was but the end product will be richer because you had that initial concept. There will be a depth.

Stephanie Zollinger: It tied you to that direction and didn't let you waver into something else.

Krista Stack: Exactly. So the fabric that's gorgeous at the end, even though it doesn't necessarily evoke water immediately, it evokes that there was a serious process behind the design. I think that that's true in textiles, in glass, and in painting. With some of the abstract paintings you don't know what it is but, if there was a process or a concept or a work behind it, I think that comes through. That was connected to my work in textiles. That came from RISD, definitely.

Stephanie Zollinger: So what happened after you graduated from both Brown and RISD?

Krista Stack: My senior year at Brown, I received an award from the Amoco Trace Yarn Competition which is, frankly, a really disgusting yarn made of a petroleum by-product that they give to all the design schools. They ask the students to make something interesting and nice out of it. Everybody in the school entered. You try things and you don't know what they're going to go for.

Stephanie Zollinger: Is it a polyurethane type of yarn?

Krista Stack: It's a little bit like that because it has a coating on it. If you were winding a warp so that the thread is going through your fingers for a long time, your fingers would have this coconut feel. It smelled because they covered it to try and make it nicer. Everyone ran to wash their hands when they were done. But it was a great program to give exposure to students. One of the judges at that competition was Mark Pollack. He had, at that point, already started his own company, Pollack and Associates. He was the only designer in his company and he was ready to hire an assistant. He had seen that piece and then he contacted me so, my senior year at Brown, I was interviewing with Mark Pollack in New York. Throughout the summer, it was unclear whether I was going to get the job or what I was going to do. It actually dragged on for a really long time. In the end, I didn't get it. Another woman, whom I later became great friends

with, Lori Roop, became his first assistant. She was with him for ten years, I think. One of the reasons he said that I didn't get it is he thought that I was too much like him. He wasn't saying that I was a carbon copy, but that my designs were too similar to his designs. He said that, in expanding a studio, you don't want somebody that does the same kind of things. That was terribly depressing at the time but ended up fine. I went back to Providence and took more classes at RISD. I took the Jacquard class in the fall. When I finished, I sent out résumés and cover letters to New York, 50, 60 of them. Every company that I could think of I sent letters to. I had a number of interviews. Everybody told me that my style was too sophisticated, which is not what you want to hear when you're finishing school. Everyone said, "Your work is beautiful. It's fantastic. It's just too sophisticated." I'm thinking, "Well, I can do less."

Stephanie Zollinger: I can dumb it down.

Krista Stack: Yes, but that was a little depressing. I went to New York for various interviews to companies that, now, I'm so grateful didn't hire me because I would have never had the exposure. About three months after I sent the letter to Larsen, I got a letter back that said they had an opening. I went to New York. It was my birthday. I had done an internship in high school with Sheila Hicks, who's a pretty renowned fiber artist. I had worked in her studio in Paris between my junior and senior year of high school. She was in New York at the time. I met with her and I showed her my portfolio that I was going to show Jack. She said, "This is horrible. What are you thinking? These colors." When you weave at RISD, the yarns that you weave from are the yarns that are free and available so you don't focus on the colors particularly. My color sense at that point was not particularly strong. There were other people definitely that had a stronger color sense but you were using what you had.

Stephanie Zollinger: It was more about the structure?

Krista Stack: It was more about the structure and the idea. If you were doing a project on bricks and grass, which was one of the double-weave themes that I chose, thinking about bricks and how the grass breaks through and interacts with the bricks. I used a lot of red and green which isn't necessarily lovely. When I put together a portfolio now, I have a much greater consciousness of the overall image that is presented and the sense of that when we do a trunk show at Larsen. You want the flow

from one fabric to the other. You want the overall richness of color and sensation. My portfolio was four years of individual projects scattered together. Sheila also has a very strong personality and she said, "You're wearing that? What are you wearing that for?" I don't even know what I was wearing but she had me take off whatever jacket I was wearing. She gave me a Japanese kimono top to wear over the pants and the blouse that I was wearing. I have to say, I think it probably made a difference because Jack immediately noticed that it was a very beautiful Japanese kimono that I was wearing when I entered. To that point, I remember when I went to meet Mark Pollack. I was wearing a yellow leather skirt and a purple silk jacket and a tie that was hand-woven of bright colors. I looked like a kaleidoscope, I can imagine. He was all in black and I had this impression as I was walking in of, "I'm just too bright." You know, those subtle things that make an impact. So I met with Jack and I showed him my portfolio. At that point, Lori Weitzner was doing collections in the studio. I met with Lori Weitzner and showed her my portfolio. I remember her asking me about my design process and how do you start with an idea. I also met with a woman named Gerry Cerf, who was the Head of Marketing at that time, and I got hired. I got hired on a three-month trial period for \$20,000 a year, which was more money than it is now, but it wasn't a lot of money then.

Stephanie Zollinger: In New York?

Krista Stack: In New York, for \$20,000 a year and a three-month trial. I remember saying, "You've just got to go for it. If you're good, then it's going to work. If it doesn't work, then you'll be in New York and you'll figure out something else." I have friends, actually from RISD, who said to me, "Oh, you're not going to work there, are you? You're not going to take it?" I said, "Yes," because, for me, it had been my dream forever. The Larsen Studio didn't have, frankly, a particularly great reputation. The person whom I replaced, a woman named Herman Yu, didn't have a very positive relationship with Jack. She was very glad to be leaving. Then there was the person before her, a man named Michael Koch, who has gone on in the industry and has a lot of talent. But the rumors around the industry were of strife. Jack would make people cry. He was not effusive with praise. The reputation was that he was hard to deal with.

Stephanie Zollinger: The rumor.

Krista Stack: The rumor, yes. So, going into that and people saying, "Well, you're not going to take that?" It was for a three-month trial but I was definitely a bit nervous starting out in that way.

Stephanie Zollinger: So where did you live in New York on that budget, a small apartment with lots of roommates?

Krista Stack: No. Honestly, that's a whole other story because Sheila Hicks had an extra apartment in New York. It's one of those near the great and famous. Sheila Hicks had an apartment that Mildred Constantine was renting. She was another grande dame of textile arts and she was a writer. She wrote many famous books.

Stephanie Zollinger: She wrote some with Larsen.

Krista Stack: Yes, she wrote some with Jack, and she was very involved in the MoMA (Museum of Modern Art). Frankly, when I was interviewing with Jack, Sheila said to me, "You shouldn't take this job. You shouldn't work for Jack." She said that Matilda McQuaid, who was the curator at the MoMA at that time, working on a great exhibition of Japanese textiles, "You should volunteer for her." I'm thinking, I'm not interested in museum work. I'm not interested in volunteering. I would like, I want, a job, and I want to work for Jack. It wasn't a strong thing but she was definitely encouraging me towards museum work because I knew her through my mother, and she was involved in the Japanese project. She wasn't in any way angry or anything when I took the job with Jack. She has a good relationship with him, too. Sheila had the idea that, with her extra apartment, Mildred Constantine would use it during the day, as a writing/working/office space, and I would use it in the evenings. We would both pay a smaller portion of the rent. It was \$400. \$400 is something you can afford. I lived there for about three weeks. I have a huge respect for Sheila. I really like her as a person and respect her. She's very directing, though. This is how she's so successful. She had a grand plan of the world and how it should be. Her plan was a little too invasive into my world and my life. She would come by and then scold me for not watering the plants. I was just breaking out of college. You want to be independent. You want to be on your own. You don't want a mother figure telling you, "You didn't water the plants," or, "Who's coming home with you after?" You just didn't want that. I had said to my mom, "I have to leave. I have to find something else." Again, connections, another

grande dame of the textile industries, Mary Walker Phillips, who was a knitter of great acclaim, had an apartment in the West Village. Sheila and Mary Walker Phillips didn't always get along so grand because they were both strong personalities. It wasn't war but they weren't so warm. I shouldn't probably be saying this on tape, but Mary was thrilled to help me out of Sheila's situation. I lived at Two Horatio Street, which is a gorgeous building in the center of the West Village. She owned that apartment. It was a doorman building. I think that the maintenance, the monthly fee on that apartment, even though she owned it, was something around \$1500 or \$2000 a month for her. Because I was paying \$400 to Sheila, she let me pay \$400 to her. I had a dream situation because I had a large one-bedroom apartment to myself in the heart of the Village. She would come once a year, maybe twice a year, and stay for two or three weeks. During that time, I would leave and go stay with friends in Brooklyn. Then I would come back and live in her apartment. That was fantastic, to have that kind of grounding in the beginning.

I started to work for Jack and I could walk to work because, at that time, the studio was in the East Village. It was on University Place. My official boss was Gerry Cerf. You had some questions about how it was structured. Gerry was who I went to for any kind of administration issues, for a day of vacation, or anything logistical. Anything artistic was Jack, unquestionably. At that time it was, I think, quite different than the Larsen Studio of the past. In the spring of '94 I started at Larsen. At that point, when I was hired, I was the only designer and I was straight out of school. I was obviously not the senior designer building the collections because I was totally raw.

Stephanie Zollinger: So you were there full-time but then Lori Weitzner was there half the time?

Krista Stack: Lori Weitzner was hired on a contract basis. She was hired as an outside person, not an employee of the company, to design collections. She was just finishing the Rhythm and Line Collection when I started. *Simply Grand* had been introduced the fall before. I literally saw the trunk show for *Rhythm and Line*. She was introducing that collection. We were just starting to work on *Paradigm*. I did *Paradigm*, actually came up with the word, which everyone had a question about. People would always say "para-dig-m." The Paradigm Collection was just the very, very beginning. Lori was hired as an outsider to do these specific collections. She didn't have specific days in the studio. We would know when she

was coming and going. I would assist her in anything she needed. If she wanted a graphic drawn out, whatever she needed me to do, I would do for her.

Stephanie Zollinger: So was she your mentor at the time, project director? You were doing *Paradigm* with Lori?

Krista Stack: Right. I was also doing collections with Jack. Everybody was very careful about Jack. If Jack asked for something, it got done. If I was doing a project for Lori and Jack needed me, I would go to Jack. He ranked, without a doubt. There was no conflict of being pulled between them. Gerry Cerf was fantastic about that by saying, "Let me know if you have a problem with your time being split between them." Gerry Cerf was actually my mentor from a non-artistic standpoint. That's really important, too, to know how to manage the work you're doing and those kinds of things. Lori was introducing the fall collection and Jack would have a January introduction. The budget was very tight at that point. They didn't have a lot of money to introduce whatever they wanted. It was quite constricted. There was a collection so Jack would be working on things but he was not that involved at that point. He was not that focused.

Stephanie Zollinger: He was phasing out?

Krista Stack: Phasing out in some ways. I don't know if there were other issues going on in his world. From the very beginning, I have always had a very positive relationship with Jack. When I would go into his office for a meeting we would talk about design, or ideas, or projects, it was always genuinely stimulating and interesting. It wasn't where Lori would say, "This is the concept. Then, from the concept, we're going to draw down from the concept to different ideas." Jack was much more, "Here's this napkin that is a really great color. It's fantastic. Let's find a way to bring this color into what we're doing." If there were a project on silk linens that were woven in Thailand, Jack would come into the studio and give me some yarns and say, "Set up the loom with this warp." Then he'd say, "We're going to start to do some brocades." We would talk about that but it wasn't from an emotional concept at the beginning. Then I just wove lots of samples. Then, "This one's working. This one's not working. Let's take this one to that place." There was clearly an idea behind it because there was cohesiveness to the group and the yarns but it wasn't anything that Jack verbalized.

Stephanie Zollinger: So, when you were there, you were the weaver, the structure person. Did he have anyone there that was the equivalent to a Paul Gedeohn?

Krista Stack: This is the whole catch of my time there, there was no one.

Stephanie Zollinger: So it was you, Krista Stack?

Krista Stack: It was only me and there wasn't a lot of budget. It was not the studio that I visited when I was in high school which had, literally, what seemed like fifteen people in it. It seemed full but when I arrived there was me. There was a person that was Gerry Cerf's assistant that did advertising, marketing, and graphic work. They were on a par level to myself in that the first person that was hired exactly at the same time as me left, got fired after four to six months. They didn't work out. The next person that was hired became a very dear friend of mine. We were the same kind of level. She was marketing. I was design. Gerry Cerf was above, and then Jack and Lori were above. I wasn't hired as a structural expert, in any way. I was hired as a young design student and it was fortunate that I was pretty good at structure because, when Jack asked me to do something, I could just do it. I think that was definitely good for me in that it was easy that I could do those things. I was doing graphic work, as well. They didn't ask me to paint because I didn't paint. Actually, yes, I did some painting, too, but not like painting a picture that would then be made into a print. Lori was a painter. I don't even think we did any prints at that time. Lori did all the painting and graphics. We would also buy designs from artists. From the very beginning I would sit in with Jack and Lori. Then with the mill so, any time a mill came, they would come with a suitcase and big samples, and samples, and samples, and samples. You'd say, "This one," and, "That one." You'd pull out ten samples, or two samples, or twenty samples, whatever interested you from their range of possibilities. Then, they would later send you cuttings of those samples and a price list. I think that I was able to be in those meetings fairly early on. I could ask valid questions of the mills, such as, "This is an interesting sample but are you able to add an extra warp to make it? Are you able to change it?" The questions that I asked were intelligent questions, towards how you can change this fabric that you've done into some fabric that we've done.

Stephanie Zollinger: Something structurally?

Krista Stack: Something structurally. Also just understanding, for example, the Japanese mill. *Fielding* and all that whole series came from one particular Japanese mill. We would see things and they were horrible in color. The colors that they came with were so bizarre. So, "If we piece-dyed this, can you use two different polyesters, so that one color is different than this area? Or is this yarn connected to this one? Can we get different colors in these sections?" It wasn't only weaving questions it would also be piece-dyeing questions. I met with print mills and asked questions such as, "How many screens can you use? Can this fabric be done with a burnout and then a print? Or do you have to print it before you burnout?" I would ask technical questions to understand the possibilities. Then, when I met with Jack and Lori, I would be ready with the answer of what it is possible to do. I'd say, if Jack wanted to do the burnout, "This won't do a burnout." And he would say, "Well, why not?" "It won't technically do a burnout. We have to get another one but I'll see if we can find it." I realized that a little bit of what I did was what I wanted to be as a secretary, finding out what can be done, how it can be done. I wasn't painting grand things. I was weaving.

Stephanie Zollinger: It was the weaving and also your knowledge?

Krista Stack: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: You were able to transfer that information and you were the go-between, in essence, between the mill and Jack?

Krista Stack: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: But, because of your background, you were able to communicate intelligently?

Krista Stack: Exactly. I think that, working with the mills, the main part of your job is communicating through the studio, to the mills, to get the mills to do what you want. Even if it's a case of understanding the mill's situation and saying, "I'm going to ask you to do this really crazy thing. I know it's going to take a lot of time to set up the work in this way, and I know you normally don't do this, but could you do it for us?" rather than just saying, "Make this for me."

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes.

Krista Stack: And they're sitting there saying, "She doesn't even know anything." If you acknowledged their standpoint, the mills, on the whole, wanted to do crazy things. They wanted to push the limits and go places. They were happy to do the work if they had a partner in understanding what you would get.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right. Now I know, at the height, Jack had probably around 30, 33 mills around the world.

Krista Stack: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: When you were there did he still have that number?

Krista Stack: I think that, yes, the marketing quote is 33 countries around the world. It probably was not 33 countries but it was definitely spread throughout the world. I worked with Japan, Thailand, India, England, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. So the Far East, and European, and American mills. I did very little work with South America. There was one mill in South America that I worked with. Not 33 but maybe 20. There were a lot.

Stephanie Zollinger: And each mill had its own specialty, so it depended on what type of fabric you wanted to produce as to what mill you would direct your work?

Krista Stack: Absolutely. During my time there it was different than earlier times. I think at earlier times they came up with a concept and then went to a mill. During my time we would see all the different things and say, "This is good. This is an interesting start." Then, from that start, you could pull it together. There was one example. We needed a collection for January which would be my first January there. I started in the spring of '94 so January '95 we needed a collection of fabrics to introduce. Jack didn't have a whole lot on the table and Lori wasn't contractually obligated for that. There was a phrase that was used at the time with great scorn. It was called "designing by committee" when the Marketing Director, and the President, and the salespeople say, "We need some contract fabrics."

In retrospect, I can be much more critical of that because it needed a designer to pull it forward but I wasn't old enough or experienced enough to do that. At that point the whole industry wasn't really doing that. I look at some of the fabrics that I did and I think, "What was that about?" It was about the direction from the President of the company saying, "We're selling a lot of this old fabric which is 50,000 rubs contract so we need another fabric that's 50,000 rubs contract." Then you'd look for the best thing you could find at 50,000 rubs contract. It wasn't ideal. Not that anything is ever ideal, but it was a little screwy awkward.

Stephanie Zollinger: So were these fabrics the fabrics that you looked for and you bought from the mill?

Krista Stack: We almost never bought something exactly from the mill. I was saying that, in January, we saw a collection from a mill that Lisa Scull was designing for, who is a former Larsen designer and my teacher at RISD. She was a freelance designer working with that mill in England. We saw the work and it looked classic Larsen because of Lisa Scull. It looked great and it was available. We picked a number of the designs from the mill and we added to them. Actually, to that one we didn't even add any designs. We picked designs from the mill that Lisa Scull had done. We were going to introduce it for the January collection and they asked me to color them. Now, just out of school, I'd never colored a collection of wovens. These were fabrics that had an end-in-end warp which is two colors in the warp and three colors in the weft, so to combine five yarn colors.

Stephanie Zollinger: So, when they say color them, does that mean add additional colors?

Krista Stack: No, they mean specify the colors when the mills send us samples. There's one. Here is a green sample. Isn't it lovely? When we would introduce a fabric you would need a cream, a beige, a red, a green, a blue, a color line.

Stephanie Zollinger: Colorway.

Krista Stack: Right. So, when you would color a fabric, you would create all of the colors. You would create 100 colors and then pick from that 100

because with weaving you weave on a blanket. If we were looking to get ten colors out I'd set up ten in the warp and 20 in the weft. Then you have a checkerboard blanket of things that you cross your fingers and hope work. They gave me a pile of yarns and said, "Specify the colors." When you're looking at the warp colors I could go with black and white together in the warp, I could go with pale blue and dark blue, I could go with yellow and green, I could go with yellow and orange, I could go with red and blue. So, do you go opposites? Do you go high contrast? Do you go low contrast? When you set it up on the loom you can't pick because it's fixed on the loom. I was lost. Basically, this was the kind of thing that I would go to Gerry for because Jack wasn't involved on that level. Gerry couldn't do it but I'd say, "Gerry, I don't know how to do this, but I can guess." Lori came from a print background so she didn't have the expertise on that either.

Stephanie Zollinger: But she knew color combinations?

Krista Stack: She knew color combinations but not woven color combinations when you put two colors so close next to each other. It wasn't her job. She was working on her own collection. She wasn't hired to do this collection.

Stephanie Zollinger: So the colors look different together?

Krista Stack: Absolutely. Think about everything Josef Albers has done in color theory, two colors right next to each other, two colors far away from each other, and how fat the yarns are, how thin the yarns are, if one is underneath and one is on top. There are so many crazy things that can go on. It was an amazing experience for me. Gerry said, "Well, can you do this first of all?" I said, "If I'm just writing it all down on paper, no. I have no idea if it will work or not." What we came to is that I would set up the warp colors. I would do my best guess of the warp colors. Then she sent me to England, to the mill. Then, as I'm looking at the loom, I could say, "Dark red, light red, and yellow." I would look at it and say, "That really didn't work. Try red, green, and blue. I need totally different colors. No, I need white, cream, and beige." You could make things that were very close. You could do it actually on the loom. I worked so hard. By chance, Lisa Scull was there with me which was an amazing help because she was designing her next collection for that mill. We got there

early and we stayed late and the mill was helpful, too. In retrospect it was an ultimate failure.

Stephanie Zollinger: What a learning experience.

Krista Stack: It was a great learning experience. Now, if I were doing that, I would create a palette. I would take yarn samples from magazine pictures or little scraps of fabrics. I would create a board that had the color direction of the type of rainbow. I would decide which kind of red, a brick red or a fire engine red. I would create the palette that I was going for and then I would try to fill it. I didn't have that thing in my head. I didn't know I needed it. I was just trying to make pretty colors and that's such an abstract thing. I went to England. I did that and that was fantastic. I came home and then we got all the blankets. We pulled together a collection. It got introduced and it was okay. It's the kind of thing where I look back on it and think, "I could do it so much better now." Again, it was an amazing experience. I started in April. That fall I went to the loom in England by myself and in January I was supposed to go to Heimtextil, which is the big trade fair in Germany, with Jack. Jack was going to take me. That was a great honor to be able to go with him to meet all the mills and be introduced. We were going to stay in the home of one of the mill owners because we couldn't get a hotel room because we signed up too late. The day before I was supposed to leave with Jack, Jack wasn't feeling well and decided not to go.

Stephanie Zollinger: Oh, no!

Krista Stack: So, less than a year on the job, I went to the largest trade fair in Jack's name and had all of Jack's meetings that he was supposed to be attending. I was definitely in a trial-by-fire situation of making it at Larsen. It wasn't that I had a mentor that built me up. I did have a mentor and I continue to say, every time I met with Jack, it was stimulating, and it was interesting, and it was fantastic for me to have the balance of then meeting with Lori who worked in a totally different way. I think, now, that I pulled from both of them in working in both of their styles in different ways. You had asked if one designer had a project and followed it through. I was the only designer so it wasn't an aspect and there wasn't a real sense of propriety because it was only me.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you feel, when you were having trouble and they asked you to do the colors, that you could go to Jack and say, "Can you help me out here? I haven't done this."

Krista Stack: Well, I did but his whole process was so different. He would look at the yarns and he would say, "These two are quite nice together. These are quite nice together." But then there was no red and, from a Lori/Gerry point of view, from a sales analysis point of view, you need to have a red. It's the second best-selling color so it's a mix of going back and forth. In my later years at Larsen, after Larsen was bought by Cowtan & Tout, Jack was a consultant but not leading the show in any way. I would still meet with him. I would show him what I was working on. He would say he liked it or he didn't. In that case my boss was the Marketing Director from England and that process went, "Here's what's selling. Here's the greatest analysis. These are selling very well but we only have two colors of it. I'll bet if we made it in five colors it would sell even better." When you asked something earlier about if something was in the collection or not, Larsen also did that in the sense that they would introduce a solid basic in one collection. It would sell really well so they introduced it in five colors. Two years later, when they were doing another collection, they may put another six colors of that same fabric in to round out the color line. It's because solids go in many collections and, when they're sold in the showroom, they're not necessarily displayed by collection. The latest collection is, "Here is the latest grouping." Then, after that, "Here are the wools. Here are the sheers. Here are the silks." "If you have the silks here, why do you only have three colors of this great silk?" "Oh, we introduced another twelve."

Stephanie Zollinger: So, from a cataloguing point of view, is it wrong to try to categorize them or to organize the fabrics by collection? Would it be better to organize it by name?

Krista Stack: I think that by collection is important in terms of the way it's introduced. The high-profile fabrics, in terms of the large graphics, or the significant impact fabrics, are the ones that lead a collection but, in every collection that has big graphics and a strong impact, there are basics. You can still categorize it by collection, but know that those basics are going to cross. There may be a collection of wool solids and that may be the collection but I think that, on the whole, it's going to break the rules at times. It would be seldom or unusual that you would introduce a large

graphic as a center point of a collection and then introduce another colorway down the line.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right, like *Caravan* was part of the African Collection and then, chances are, because it was so well-known as a piece of that collection, it wouldn't be re-introduced ten years later?

Krista Stack: I would say if you have introduced *Caravan* as part of the African Collection and then two years later two more colors of *Caravan* came out with the X Collection, they're still part of the Caravan Collection, or they're still part of the African Collection, but they just added those colors at the same time period as the other collection. The first introduction date is more the conceptual point.

Stephanie Zollinger: So then it really does depend on the colorway as to what collection it belongs in?

Krista Stack: That's unusual, to add more colors of an item, but yes. There was a big thing when Cowtan & Tout bought Larsen to fill in the collection of things that were missing in terms of rounding out color lines. They very clearly looked at it like, "These are your strongest-selling items. They have this aesthetic which is not so contract." Larsen crosses in between contract and residential, particularly in the '80s and '90s. It was the high-end contract that was almost residential quality, those really expensive wools that Pollack did. I would say, during my time, it had a real identity crisis. The company wasn't sure if it was doing luxury fancy things or residential. I remember many times, if you brought a silk sheer to Jack, Jack would say, "You can't put in a silk sheer because of sun rot." Then, when Colefax came in, they said, "Yes, but you have all these other silk sheers in the line and a residential home may not care so we're going to do it anyway." So they did it and they failed because everybody else sells silk that goes at the window, but Jack was so aware of the technical kind of things.

Stephanie Zollinger: The characteristics.

Krista Stack: Yes. Sometimes those became a limitation in what he would consider because he knew of those technical aspects. There's a fabric, I forget its name right now, but it was introduced. It couldn't be

treated for flame retardancy. They said, "That's alright, we'll sell it as residential." That would have never got past Jack. If it couldn't have application in contract situations as well, then he wouldn't consider it. But, because Cowtan & Tout came from a family of residential fabric companies, that's where their market was. They didn't have any awareness that because, for example, it's made out of acetate, acetate wasn't acceptable. They didn't have technical awareness. They didn't care. Financially they're fine but lack of technical awareness became a limitation.

Stephanie Zollinger: Can you talk about some of your fondest memories in working with Larsen and his company? By then was he still having the same parties?

Krista Stack: The parties were always great because they were so community-based and informal. The Christmas party was potluck. It was fun because everyone had a really happy spirit. We invited customers. The mills could come to the party but it was certainly different from the grand old days. The Christmas party was good fun. The sales conferences were fun because they were all very grounded people who all really cared about it. This is perhaps getting into politics but I think it's important that it be stated in some way that I've encountered the design world after Larsen and that it's quite different than at Larsen. The people who are interior designers, and the people who are in the interior design world, and, frankly, many other companies in the industry, particularly in the residential industry, which Larsen is a part of, are different than how Larsen was. There's a greater consciousness towards fashion and society than Larsen people had. I don't want to say it too negatively but I didn't quite realize the negative stereotype that some people have of interior decorators, that sort of fluffy, "Oh, darling, it's beautiful." My husband calls them "The Spice Girls." It's that kind of idea of super fashionable women who are picking sofa fabric. Larsen didn't have that aura about it at all. People were not pretentious. The salespeople were interesting, cool, fashionable, but not following the fashion in a desperate sense. I think that in the end hurt them a little bit because they were a little bit too idiosyncratic. The Larsen line was a little, and still is, "wonky," and it's cool, and it's interesting, and it's intellectual, but a lot of the volume dollars in interior design go to a gorgeous silk that's flowery.

Stephanie Zollinger: Do you think interior designers really understood the intent or the background from which Larsen was designing? Did they appreciate it?

Krista Stack: I think so.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did they appreciate the experimentation with the weave structure and know that it was cutting-edge because it was different? Maybe they didn't understand the structure enough and looked more at the color and the aesthetics rather than, as you said, the intellectual meaning behind the piece?

Krista Stack: Yes. Some interior designers, and obviously Jack, had a lot of acclaim. Jack had many, many years of experience. He has a lot of acclaim among museums and among intellectuals. For me, obviously, with my background of a ten-year-old dreaming of Larsen, Larsen is God in that world. Certainly today there are a lot of people who have never heard of Larsen in the interior design world. It's a different thing. I was there in the '90s. The '90s were not the heyday of Larsen in any way but I think that, when Jack started doing those cool things, the interior decorators and the designers that had that consciousness, or that openness to a spark, came to him in droves. That's why he was so successful because companies like Scalamandré, and Brunschwig, and Fils, and a lot of traditional home decorating companies did things that were very different from Larsen. Larsen currently competes in a more traditional sense with those companies. The interior designers that I'm speaking of in a negative way should probably stick with Brunschwig.

Stephanie Zollinger: I also know, when he started out and was introducing these colorways that people hadn't seen before, a lot of the designers would say, "What do we do with these things?"

Krista Stack: How do we use them?

Stephanie Zollinger: Right.

Krista Stack: Absolutely.

Stephanie Zollinger: So he then had to educate the designers on how to use these things, and maybe it goes down to another level of residential, the owner of the residence, because they're hiring the interior designer.

Krista Stack: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: So their preference has a play in what gets chosen?

Krista Stack: I think a critical aspect in the whole chain of it, which Jack understood, was education. The sales events were totally fun because, as I did a trunk show showing the new collection to the salespeople, they wanted information. If I said, "This is a burnout and it's an acid poured onto this fabric. There's a polyester underneath but it's not affecting the cotton on top," they wanted to know that. Those designers, our salespeople, were looking for information to use to sell. They wanted to be able to share with their clients or their customers the intellectual beauty and the strength of this fabric beyond the obvious visual. I think that they obviously cared for the visual because they couldn't make it in the industry if it was ugly. It needed to be beautiful. Those salespeople were drawn to Larsen. When I say intellectual, I don't necessarily mean high-minded, but there was a thought process behind it. The salespeople were really down to earth, weren't following that glamor. It was glamorous, but they were just really grounded people.

Stephanie Zollinger: I say this about you, and maybe the other people that worked at Larsen, they were there because of a passion. They weren't there to make lots of money.

Krista Stack: Because they weren't making lots of money, yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: They had that same value that I think Larsen had and that was to create beautiful things that maybe personally you thought were beautiful.

Krista Stack: And to push the limits, to really stretch yourself.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right. You weren't there to work out what's going to really sell.

Krista Stack: Right. Well, you would certainly want to know what's going to sell.

Stephanie Zollinger: You would want to know.

Krista Stack: We weren't unhappy with that. Also, at the time I was there in the '90s, you had the Larsen history behind you. There was a Larsen look, but it was more challenging because the mills were doing more interesting things. They were showing a fabric that was in their collection that very often could have been in the Larsen collection. When Jack started there was no competition, really. There was a lot of competition for things to make it look unique, and special, and different. I would say one of my proudest fabrics and this is, again, a technical moment, but I was shown the fabrics *Coffee Bean* and *Sugar Cane*. They are double weaves with additional pop, so there's a pop ball and a pop stripe that has a ground structure underneath it and then the pop on top. I was shown it by the mill. I think the mill showed me a diamond or something, a variation of the same structure. They worked out the structure and I said, "Wow, that's really amazing, what you did. That's really interesting. We're going to take that sample." We talked about it and that mill obviously showed that fabric to everyone else, too. We took that initial sample and we said, "I know this mill, this is on a silk warp." I think it was all silk, or maybe silk and acetate, but it was a luxury, glamorous residential, and it didn't pass any rubs for durability. We said, "Well, this mill also has polyester warps and if you mix the silk with the polyester you could make it more durable." So I said, "Can you weave the same thing on the polyester warp and send it to us?" They sent it to us and it looked horrible because the polyester came through too strong. It looked like a funky fabric that was cheap. It didn't work. We asked them to re-weave it on the polyester warp changing the structure so it was more weft-faced. The silk that was in the weft was showing more but it still had the polyester structure. The percentage of warp to weft needed to get shifted and they did that again and then it looked pretty cool. We kept adjusting it from the mill. We came out with *Coffee Bean* and *Sugar Cane*. They passed 15,000 rubs which is not contract but it is a solid residential or a light-duty contract. They were cheaper than the all-silk version.

In the same season that we came out with that, another company, J. Robert Scott, came out with an all-silk diamond. It's the same thing. It hit the market. Those things happen. They hit the market at the same time. You would love to be angry with the mill but they're trying to make a living. They developed this thing and ours was cheaper and more durable so I was proud that we had done something better about it but, to the casual customer on the market, they don't know. They look at it. They look pretty similar. They have the diamond. They have a dot. They have a stripe. But we could tell our salespeople that ours was more durable and then they could hold onto that. In that way, if somebody as an interior designer cared enough to find out, they could. I've mentioned to you my curiosity and Jack's interaction with his clients and respect because, since I've left Larsen and continued in the industry, I now work for mills much more. I do some editing work with some companies but I prefer the mill people because they're more grounded than the interior design people. There are certainly some really talented interior designers who know what they're looking for, know what they're going for and can create amazing spaces, but there are also some that are less so. As my husband would say, "They're the Spice Girls." There's a lot of scene in that front face-end of the industry that I'm not a part of and Jack was related to it in the sense that he's doing the carpet for Liz Taylor.

Stephanie Zollinger: And he knows that impression sells. You get that first impression.

Krista Stack: And he's good at that.

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes, within so many seconds.

Krista Stack: Absolutely, yes, and he obviously was much better at everything. He could work that clientele in a way.

Stephanie Zollinger: In closing, when we look at Larsen and we know that he's going to go down in history, what would you say are some of the most significant things that made him unique?

Krista Stack: Without a question, he broke boundaries in terms of fabrics where they brought in the international aspect. Interior fabric meant French chintz and it was the beginning of the global economy, of bringing

fabric, bringing the best things from all over the world, to here for us. It's all about globalization.

Stephanie Zollinger: He was global before there was global.

Krista Stack: He was global before it was bad.

Stephanie Zollinger: "Made in China" had a whole different meaning.

Krista Stack: Exactly. I work for mills in India and I'm part of that. American mills are having a really hard time right now. The American mills, many of them, are going out of business. They're not keeping up with the quality, and innovation, and interesting things that can be done all over the world. I think of that global aspect and contemporary design, that French chintz was stuck there for a long time. Bringing in contemporary arts, the whole movement that Jack brought, was more fine arts. Jack was continuing the tradition that brought it into use for everybody. He's continuing that concept to a larger volume, to a larger audience, and pushing the limits. Where now, to select audiences, I will describe myself as an artist or a designer because the process that goes into the design is a genuinely artistic process, it doesn't matter that it's being mass produced. It's actually cool. It's great that it's being mass produced. It doesn't have to be one of a kind. I have a loom in my home and, I have to say, I have a really hard time working on it now. I do it sometimes but I think, "I know this mill could make this better and more quickly." I don't need to go through the slowness of it. I want to do something on my hand loom that can't be done on an industrial loom. In the same way, Jack used hand weavers in Thailand to make fabrics that could not be done on the industrial looms in Japan. Those fabrics couldn't be done on the looms in France and those fabrics couldn't be done on the looms in South America. He was really using the skills and specialization of the facilities to get to push something interesting.

Stephanie Zollinger: Well, thank you very much.

Krista Stack: Absolutely, my pleasure.

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you. That was great.

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