

Jack Lenor Larsen Oral History Project: Interview with Lori Weitzner

Stephanie Zollinger: It's May 18, 2009, which is a Monday and this is Stephanie Zollinger. I'm here talking with Lori Weitzner and we're about to begin the interview. I want to ask Lori to start with some background information in terms of where you grew up, your passions when you were growing up, and we'll go from there.

Lori Weitzner: I grew up in Scarsdale, New York, which is a suburb of New York City. I went to the University of Syracuse. Ever since I was very little I wanted to be a painter, always. I just wanted to be a fine art painter. When I went to Syracuse I was majoring in Painting. Then my professor told me that I should major in Textile Design because I had a good color sense and a good sense of composition. My professor said I wasn't going to make a living as a painter which, at first, devastated me. The fact is, it was probably the best advice I had ever had.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you graduate with a degree in Painting?

Lori Weitzner: BFA in Textile Design.

Stephanie Zollinger: Textile Design, that's great.

Lori Weitzner: I did the print design move but, unfortunately, at that time at Syracuse, they separated out print design and woven design, which I think is a big mistake in general for schools to do. So I had to learn the wovens later.

Stephanie Zollinger: From your degree in Textile Design how did you end up working with the Larsen Studio?

Lori Weitzner: First, I worked for a number of years on my own. Well, I worked for one year at a company called Fieldcrest, designing sheets and towels, then I went on my own and I freelanced. I put together a portfolio of designs. I sold them everywhere, in Europe as well as here, but more in Europe. Then I came back. I had built a business taking these

patterns that I made and selling them for fabric and also for ceramic, for wrapping paper, for wall covering, and for all kinds of things. Of course I'd always known of Jack Larsen. Every textile designer does. I admired him so much that I tried to meet him a number of times. One time I was able to get an appointment with him and we kept in touch. Then, a few years after that, he called to tell me he was looking for a new Design Director. I came to see him but, at that point, I had already built my own freelance business up quite well. I couldn't imagine all of a sudden working full-time again for Jack or for anybody. But, on the other hand, it was Jack Larsen and, "Oh my God, this is the most amazing possibility." So, after thinking a lot about it, I approached Jack and I asked him if there was a way he would allow me to work for him as an independent designer and design autonomous collections for him under my name. He allowed me to do so, which was fantastic.

Stephanie Zollinger: It was a one-time opportunity.

Lori Weitzner: I think so, and he really let me do my own thing, which was amazing. The only thing that I had to promise him is that I would not work for a competitor at that time. That was fine because all the other work I was doing was for other industries. I think he was also smart because what that enabled me to do was bring fresh ideas back to the studio because I was out more than the typical person working in the design studio.

Stephanie Zollinger: How did you decide what ideas you would keep as part of your own identity and the Lori Weitzner Collection and the ideas that you had for Lori Weitzner under Larsen?

Lori Weitzner: Well, it was pretty easy to do. It was intuitive as to what Larsen needed at the time in the company in terms of what kinds of fabrics they were missing and looking for the voids. I worked out where I could offer something to fill those voids that had a handwriting that was more Lori but completely melded or worked with Larsen.

Stephanie Zollinger: Can you describe in detail some of your day-to-day duties and explain the process of coming up with the collection, how you developed your concept and carried it through?

Lori Weitzner: For me, it was pretty easy because my job was to develop a collection. I wasn't involved in a lot of the typical duties in a design studio. In fact, I got a lot of support from the people in the Design Studio to help me do my job. My job was to meet with mills and to bring them artwork based on a concept of what that collection was. In the end I think there were five collections I did for Larsen. The first one was called *Simply Grand*. It was all about these very simple but beautiful patterns that were woven in unexpected ways or printed in unexpected ways. I had to meet with the mills. I'd come to the studio about two to three times a week. I would check in and my direct contact was Gerry Cerf, the Director of Marketing. Then, of course, I would have meetings with Jack, but not that often. Probably I would check in once every five or six weeks.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did he approve the collections or the ideas that you had?

Lori Weitzner: Yes, he would approve the concept but my meetings were also with Jack, with Ellie Karanauskas, Head of Sales, with Karen Tokar, Head of Operations, with Gerry Cerf, Head of Marketing, and Susan Lambert, Head of Finance. They all had a say. It was very communal. It was very politically correct. They all had a say as we were developing and getting closer to finalizing the collection. One say from the sales point of view, one from the financial point of view, and one from the operations point of view. Someone would say, "Oh, you can't work with that mill, they're terrible." Of course there was also a say from the design point of view, which was Jack, and then the marketing point of view, which was Gerry. It was very interesting and helpful but also scary because when you get six different opinions it's difficult or challenging to get your vision across. You don't want to dilute your vision. What was really great was that, for the first collection, they didn't quite know what to make of me. They had never had an outsider come in and do a collection before so I was left on my own a little bit more than probably they would have otherwise. I was able to get through this collection. Jack was the biggest support, in terms of helping me with mills and helping me on the woven side, because I was not a weaver by training, and I was not technically astute at all. Jack is a brilliant weaver. He used to say to me something that I think to this day is true and why we worked well together, that because I'm a painter and he's a weaver, we approach design from completely opposite sides. He starts with the structure and then it becomes the design. I start with the pattern, which then becomes the structure.

Stephanie Zollinger: You work out how to get to the structure?

Lori Weitzner: Exactly.

Stephanie Zollinger: So, without a weaving background, how did you talk about wovens and bring in an unexpected element?

Lori Weitzner: Well, I started to learn a little bit before Jack because I worked in Italy. I would bring the Italian weaving mills my paintings, very impressionistic paintings, and they would weave them. They would teach me and show me how they were going to weave them. I said, "How are you going to weave that Monet-looking thing?" They would find a way to do it. I had already started learning the language when I was working in Italy, but then Jack also helped. The other people in the Design Studio were all weavers much more than painters. I know that they had previously had Paul Gedeohn, but I was not there when he was there. When I was there, there was nobody painting or drawing really. They were all weavers.

Stephanie Zollinger: He had a background similar to yours, being more of a painter.

Lori Weitzner: Paul Gedeohn, yes, I think so.

Stephanie Zollinger: Very interesting. So, working with Larsen and working in your own capacity, did you develop a team, or did you have people working with you?

Lori Weitzner: Yes. Larsen Design Studio was headed by Gerry Cerf while I was there, Head of Marketing, and under her was a Studio Manager. There were a few of them while I was there. I can't remember their names exactly, but they sent all the faxes and e-mails and contacted the mill and supported you. Then there were two designers whom I had with me that I remember very well. One was Herman Yu and then, when she left, Krista Stack took over. They were my design support in the company.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did they work exclusively for you on your lines?

Lori Weitzner: No, no. They supported me and they also supported the other developments going on in the studio. Because Jack allowed me to do autonomist collections, I was simultaneously doing things, while he was doing other things. They were always re-coloring something. There was always something that they were working on.

Stephanie Zollinger: So, when you talk about your very first collection or the collections that followed, how many pieces typically make up a collection?

Lori Weitzner: Each collection is approximately 60 to 70 SKUs (stock keeping units), with the exception of *Rhythm and Line*, which is a very special collection where we worked with children. That was smaller. That was about 40 SKUs. Then there was one that was a little bit bigger where we worked mainly with one mill in Switzerland. That was about 129 SKUs.

Stephanie Zollinger: Do you want to talk about your Rhythm and Line Collection?

Lori Weitzner: That was my favorite thing still, to date, that I've ever done. Not because the product was so spectacular but because of the process. I can't think of any other company other than Larsen that would have allowed me to do this. He allowed me to work with inner city school kids from New York and have them paint to different kinds of music. Then we took their paintings and created textiles out of them, giving a royalty back to them through an organization called The National Dance Institute. The National Dance Institute had these kids with them every afternoon after school teaching them dance. We decided to do some art-related project with them. Jacques d'Amboise was a good friend of Jack's so Jack Larsen is credited with coming up with this connection. When I presented the idea to him he just looked at me and said, "No problem, just as long as the product sells." We did make sure it sold. It also got a lot of publicity and won a lot of awards, which was worth a lot as well. It was a beautiful collection because we created a viable product commercially which went back to social causes. To this day, I love that and still want to find other ways to do that. Nobody else would have done that but Larsen.

Stephanie Zollinger: Great, and it's a nice way to give back.

Lori Weitzner: Definitely.

Stephanie Zollinger: Getting back to your involvement with the mills, can you explain in a bit more detail this relationship that you had? I know that you probably worked with more than one mill from the very start, and maybe it was different after you began to understand the woven process, but did you, once again, just take a painting to these mills?

Lori Weitzner: No. I learned a lot about each mill's own handwriting. I spent a lot of time meeting with many different mills. The good thing about being in New York City is all the European mills come through and, being at Larsen, they all wanted to come and meet with you. In the end, I probably worked with 15 different mills during all the collections I did there. Most of them were in Italy, France, Switzerland, India, America, and Belgium. It covered a lot of different countries. You start to learn what kind of feeling you want. Even if I couldn't technically describe exactly the type of weave, I would collect qualities from different mills and know that this was the type of feeling I wanted for this particular design. For example, if I wanted a cut velvet there's only one mill you go to when you want to cut velvet. If I wanted a certain kind of silk damask there's only one mill I knew that was the right one to go to. If I wanted to discharge, and so on. You start to know because each mill has its own style.

Stephanie Zollinger: Were you like Jack, where he would buy a fiber from one country, have it dyed in another, and woven in another?

Lori Weitzner: No, I wasn't as innovative as that. There was one case where I did a product, *Jacob's Ladder*, which combined a couple of mills because it utilized pleating, as well as backing, as well as velvet. So, yes, in some cases I had to find fabric from one place, pleating from another, and a backer from another but, for the most part, I was able to work with one or two mills. There's the Swiss one we worked with a lot that did both printing and weaving at the time. We did a lot of both which made the fabric really interesting. I mainly worked with the mills and a lot of the mills at that time were fashion mills trying to get into home furnishings. This was a very special time because they had really unique yarns and qualities for fashion but they were able to make them work performance-wise for home furnishing. This gave me an advantage to design something for home furnishing that you hadn't seen before.

Stephanie Zollinger: I know at the time that you may have worked with Larsen, a lot of mills did not have their own in-house designers. Is that still the case?

Lori Weitzner: Most mills today have designers there. They have products that they sell and most companies, most editors, will just pick and choose, "Oh, I'll take that, I'll take that," and not design. What was great about Larsen is that they invested in designers who went to the mill and gave them original new ideas to develop. It was very rare that we just picked something existing from a mill and used it. There are only a handful of companies even today that do that.

Stephanie Zollinger: So, what you're saying is, that's how Larsen differentiated himself?

Lori Weitzner: Absolutely.

Stephanie Zollinger: Is that other textile manufacturers?

Lori Weitzner: Jobbers or editors

Stephanie Zollinger: So they would just pick from what they had in stock and then would resell it?

Lori Weitzner: Yes. They'd recolor it or they may change this leaf this way but they wouldn't really start from scratch coming up with innovative ideas. I'm not saying everybody else, but very few. Jack Larsen was one of the few. In fact, Larsen was one of the few companies that had a loom in the studio. Most studios didn't. Most studios had designers who were just painting colorways and things like that. That, definitely, is what differentiated Larsen.

Stephanie Zollinger: In terms of marketing and advertising, how did you interact with those departments?

Lori Weitzner: That was wonderful because Gerry, the Head of the Marketing Department, was also the Head of the Design Studio. We

interacted on a daily basis. She had very good aesthetic sense and she had a very sophisticated marketing sense, which is what Larsen was always all about. She spearheaded that and did a beautiful job. Every time we came out with a collection, I had a lot of impact and influence. She allowed me a lot of freedom on what the brochure would look like, or the promotional materials, what kind of events we would do, what we would serve at those events. It was really wonderful. We'd all sit together and brainstorm.

Stephanie Zollinger: Was it collaborative?

Lori Weitzner: Totally, absolutely, collaborative. Jack wouldn't really be in on those brainstorming meetings but he would do the final approval.

Stephanie Zollinger: It sounds like a good set-up.

Lori Weitzner: It was great.

Stephanie Zollinger: In terms of your interaction with Jack, I know that once again it was somewhat collaborative. You would talk to him about your vision and how you wanted your collections to be. Did you have any other interaction with Jack during your time in the studio?

Lori Weitzner: The thing about Jack is that he really allowed me a lot of freedom. Maybe it's because my name was going on my collection that he allowed me to be freer than others who were designing for him or with him. I really appreciated that. It wasn't that he didn't guide me and critique me which, absolutely, he did. Sometimes that could be painful but he always had something that, if I could put my ego aside, was really important to pay attention to. I respected that a lot. He would allow me, for example, to do the trunk show presentation when we did an event in the showroom. He would sit back and quietly hold the rein, but let me do the song and dance. He gave me a lot of space. He gave me a lot of platform and stage actually, which I loved because I'm a ham that way. I love to give presentations. It was surprising that he did. I really appreciated that. Somehow, I'm not sure other people had that experience but I had that experience. It was really lovely. It almost felt like a mentor father allowing his daughter to grow up.

Stephanie Zollinger: To give you wings to fly.

Lori Weitzner: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: So he was a good mentor. Can you elaborate on some of the biggest lessons you learned from Jack?

Lori Weitzner: Well, he taught me a lot about “less is more.” We all know it, we all say it, but he really taught it to me. I think editing is probably just as important in the end as the designing. That I learned from him. I credit him for that. I also learned from him that you don't have to think about what is saleable first. You think about what is beautiful and what speaks to you. Chances are, if it speaks to you on some level, spiritually, as corny as that sounds, and not words he would use, but I think that's how he felt, then it would sell in the end. But he didn't run the company like a business. Some people may say, “Well, that's unfortunate because he could have made much more money.” Other people like me would say, “Well, that was really fortunate because he gave gifts to us.” The other thing I learned a lot about is opening your eyes and looking for global and timeless design. There is a level of design that's timely and timeless at the same time. He was the best at doing that.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did he do both?

Lori Weitzner: Yes, absolutely. I mean, maybe there were the exceptions of the sixties, go-go Pucci stuff but, in general, he found that space that was what I would call timely and timeless. He never did trends. I learned from that and now, with my wall covering company, I follow all of those principles. He's embedded in me. He's taught me a lot.

Stephanie Zollinger: Just by being there and watching.

Lori Weitzner: Yes. He doesn't ever talk very much, but when he speaks you listen to what he says. Something he said to me that I loved about textile designers is why he became one. You can ask him if this is the right wording, but he loved it because he thought it was the perfect balance between architecture, painting, and poetry.

Stephanie Zollinger: All woven together.

Lori Weitzner: Yes, and I think that's right.

Stephanie Zollinger: How many years did you end up working with Larsen Studio?

Lori Weitzner: I think it was six years and it was five collections. Again, I was not ever an employee. It was a very nice relationship.

Stephanie Zollinger: You talked about the memories that you have with Larsen and what took place in the studio. Can you tell us a couple of stories about your fondest memories of what happened in the studio? Could it be a Christmas party?

Lori Weitzner: We always did secret Santa for Christmas and everybody would pick another name and give gifts out. It was a very warm feeling there. There was something that bonded everybody together at Larsen. It was almost a higher calling of why people were there. I don't think it was the highest paying company. I'm not sure about that, but I don't think it was. Yet people would stay there for years and years. Ellie will probably tell you more about that side of it but the studio had a very special camaraderie. We would go out together a lot. Spend weekends together. In fact, Ellie invited us once, I'll never forget, to her country home for the weekend. We just all connected in a certain way.

Stephanie Zollinger: Do you think you have the same values in that you were after design as a passion and, as you just said, what felt good to you, rather than just out to make money?

Lori Weitzner: There was definitely something to that. We were all there for a higher calling. I think so, whether we knew it or not.

Stephanie Zollinger: That may have been the bond or the glue that held people there?

Lori Weitzner: I think you could be right, yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: In your opinion, what were Jack Lenor Larsen's greatest contributions to the textile industry?

Lori Weitzner: Well, a lot of what we just spoke about when I credited Jack with what he'd taught me but, in general, I think the globalization of finding unbelievable craft and handcraft from around the world and finding a way to bring it into becoming commercially viable was incredible. Developing weaves and structures that have never been developed before, mixing materials that have never been mixed before, and creating a whole new kind of thought process to what I call spiritual design. It's product that brings you to another level without you even knowing that it's happening. People will always be touched by his work because of that.

Stephanie Zollinger: Is there anything that you want to add for students or scholars? What would you want them to know about Jack Larsen?

Lori Weitzner: Well, I would say one thing quite personal which is, there were some points when I was working with Jack and I was young, and I was trying to prove myself, that I didn't always listen to what he said. There were times when I really disagreed. I think that's fine. I think you should have feeling, and opinion, and not be afraid to have it and to follow through on it. There were other times that, maybe, I hadn't wanted to listen to him because he had the idea. There's a kind of immaturity that was there. Maybe I didn't take full advantage of the gift of being able to work with him so closely because that's an experience very few other people have had or will ever have. I still have wonderful memories. I've saved all my letters he's written me. I've taken a lot from him but I probably could have spent more time with him. I think, at the time, I was too insecure. I say this because you asked me about advice for students and students are going to read this. Just for students to be smart about when they can really learn something, to put aside insecurity, or put aside ego, and just get as much as you can out of it because it can only help you in years to come.

Stephanie Zollinger: Well, thank you so very much. I think that will conclude this interview.

Lori Weitzner: Great, thank you.

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you.

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