

Jack Lenor Larsen Oral History Project: Interview with Miry Park

Stephanie Zollinger: It's Wednesday, September 12, and I'm here with Miry Park of Cowtan & Tout. Miry, if you would, please tell us where you were born, when you were born, and a bit about your childhood and family background.

Miry Park: Thank you. My name is Miry Park and I was born in 1966 in Seoul, South Korea. I immigrated with my family to the States in the early '70s when I was about seven years old. We moved around a lot because my father was an adventurous entrepreneur. He was chasing the "American Dream" so he would uproot his family to the next destination where he thought there was a business opportunity. As a result, I moved around a lot as a child and saw quite a bit of the United States.

Stephanie Zollinger: Within New York?

Miry Park: No. I've lived in various states all over the country, actually. I lived in New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Florida, and California. Eventually I went to school in Massachusetts and then went back to New York. It's hard to imagine these days but, when I was growing up, I was probably the only Asian in my school, if you can imagine that. Now everywhere you look there are Asians integrated into society but, when I was a child and growing up, in the places that my father chose to take us, I was the only Asian. So, as a child, what was instilled in me at a pretty early age was this need, and this desire, to rise above my double minority as a woman and also as an Asian. I think that describes my childhood a little bit.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did your parents influence you at all in terms of the arts?

Miry Park: Ironically, it's because we moved a lot that, as a result, my mother was always redoing her house, our homes. So, naturally, I was exposed to those decisions. She was very encouraging and involved me in those discussions. I think, at an early age, I was exposed to the notion of interior design. However, they didn't overtly encourage me in terms of studies or in terms of a career choice. My mother was innately stylish. She

had a great fashion sense and a great love for fashion. I think that influenced me a great deal.

Stephanie Zollinger: She taught you an eye for design.

Miry Park: Yes. She had an instinct. She had a love for creativity, and flare, and style. She really instilled that in me and I also developed a love for fashion, fashion more as a personal expression than anything else. So, because of that, when I was about 16 or 15, I took a Home Economics class when they still had those. <Laughs>

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes, I was in those.

Miry Park: I learned how to sew and I enjoyed it so much that I asked my mother for a sewing machine. I taught myself how to sew. That was the extent of my adventure with fashion, well, actually, that's not quite true. Can I backtrack a little bit?

Stephanie Zollinger: Of course.

Miry Park: In any sort of practical application of working with fashion that was the extent of it, the sewing machine and trying to figure out how to make my own clothes. So, yes, she did, they did, influence me but it was more of an unconscious influence as opposed to a direct encouragement.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right. So you ended up going to high school, I assume, on the East coast?

Miry Park: No, actually I went to high school on the West Coast and the East Coast.

Stephanie Zollinger: I see. And then where did you end up going to school or college?

Miry Park: In New York City. I started out my high school in La Jolla, California, which is a beautiful place near San Diego. Then I went away to private school in Massachusetts because I wanted to. I yearned to be

back on the East Coast. When I was 13 I decided that I wanted to move to New York City <laughs> and it just seemed closer to New York City! My ultimate goal was to live here. I was tired of moving around and so I asked my parents if I could go to a private school, a boarding school. I was accepted and I went to a boarding school in Massachusetts. Upon graduating from boarding school I wanted to have more of an open, non-campus specific experience. I went to NYU. My sister had been an alumnus of NYU so I went there. I studied Architectural History with a Minor in Non-Western Art.

Stephanie Zollinger: Very Interesting. How did you end up in the textile industry?

Miry Park: Well, while I was in college, and this is interesting because, as I was saying to you earlier, I feel like my career came to a full circle when I met Jack Larsen. During college I worked for a fashion maven named Dianne Benson. Working for her opened my eyes in so many ways. I had always been excited by fashion and always interested in fashion as a personal expression, but I was not exposed to the level of fashion and the kind of quality that I'm familiar with now before I worked for Dianne Benson. She opened my eyes.

Stephanie Zollinger: I have a question. How did you end up in architecture if you had a passion for fashion?

Miry Park: Well, this is an interesting question because, as I said to you earlier, I was always striving to rise above my double minority as a woman and as an Asian. My father would have found it acceptable for me to go into the fashion industry because that was an acceptable occupation for a woman. Just because of that, I didn't want to go into fashion as an occupation.

Stephanie Zollinger: I understand.

Miry Park: I wanted to do something different and I didn't want to do something that was acceptable as a female. I didn't strategically plan to study Architectural History, it was one of those "aha" moments when I was in front of an enormous screen on my first day of my architectural survey course. My teacher got up in front of the stage and started flashing the

world's greatest hits in terms of architecture. I was bowled over. I thought, "Wow, this is amazing. I want to know all about this." I had no clue that architecture could be so beautiful, and so vital, and so interesting. One thing led to another. I started taking more courses. I wanted to know about architectural history. My older sister was always a big influence when I was growing up. She went to study art in college and that also opened my eyes because I realized, "Wow, this is a realm that you could actually study." I had not known that prior to my sister going to art school. I always looked up to her and I was always very influenced by her original approach to life and her own flare and creativity. So I guess, in a sense, I felt a sense of permission to study architectural history because she had already paved the way.

Stephanie Zollinger: Great. So, we're going to backtrack to your story. While you're in college, you're working for whom?

Miry Park: Dianne Benson.

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes, Dianne Benson, a fashion designer.

Miry Park: That's right. She was a fashion designer but she was really influential as a fashion retailer. She had a groundbreaking shop called Dianne B. There was a location on 64th and Madison and she was one of the pioneers of SoHo. She had a shop on West Broadway. I started working for her in the early '80s before she opened her third and last shop in SoHo. Through her, I was exposed to designers like Issey Miyake and Comme des Garçons. Actually, Dianne Benson was the person to bring Comme des Garçons, Rei Kawakubo's design, to New York. She owned the first Comme des Garçons shop in New York. I was exposed to that. I was exposed to all the Japanese designers along with incredible European designers like Gaultier as they were just starting to make their mark, Azzedine Alaïa, Romeo Gigli, Helmut Lang, all these amazing, progressive designers that were just making their mark. It was a very exciting time for me because I had always loved fashion but I didn't realize the quality, and the level of originality, that existed until I worked for Dianne. I particularly remember a collection by Issey Miyake that utilized these incredibly graphic, black and white batik fabrics. That was another exposure that I received, to textiles, designed fabrics. I never really thought about textiles as being designed until I started working with this end of luxury fashion. I worked for her during college and then, right out of

college, I did a short stint in the Marketing Department of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates. They're an architectural firm in downtown New York, on Lower Broadway. As it turns out Hugh Hardy is a very good friend of Jack's.

Stephanie Zollinger: I did not realize that.

Miry Park: Also, Dianne Benson is now the Chair of LongHouse Reserve.
<Laughs>

Stephanie Zollinger: Oh really, Larsen connections are beginning to come together!

Miry Park: That's exactly right! I had worked for Dianne Benson while I was in college and, right out of college, I worked for Hugh Hardy. Then it all came full circle when I started working with Jack.

Stephanie Zollinger: So were you still at the architectural firm?

Miry Park: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you meet Jack at that time?

Miry Park: No, I didn't, actually. I really didn't know anything about Jack at that time. I decided that architecture was not the profession for me. I wanted to go to work for Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates to see if it made sense for me to go to architecture school. I decided that it was a gentleman's profession and it was not right for me. You know, you go to study architecture for a number of years and then you basically get out and slave away <laughs> for hours, and years, making very little. It was a very male-dominated field at the time and I didn't really think that that was the right job for me. One thing I discovered later, when I got into the field of textiles, was that it didn't appeal to my sensual nature the way I thought it would. There's an immediacy to textiles. You touch it. You can feel it with your eyes. You can feel it with your hands. It's covering our bodies.

Stephanie Zollinger: It's innate.

Miry Park: Yes. It's something that we have an intimate relationship with. It's a very sensual relationship and textiles gave me that. Architecture did not. Architecture is about volumes and space and I didn't have the right mindset to be able to be a successful architect. I would have been a horrible failure at it. I could appreciate it from an aesthetic point of view and from an historical point of view but, in the practical sense, I would have been a horrible architect. It's a good thing that I left Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates and applied for a job at a company called Donghia. I had absolutely no clue that this kind of industry even existed when I applied for this job.

Stephanie Zollinger: But you knew they dealt with textiles?

Miry Park: After the fact. I knew that they were in the interiors industry and I thought, "Okay, that's a sort of natural segue from architecture to interiors." They design fabrics and they design furniture. I understood that but I didn't understand the extent of it as a business. I went for the interview and I think that the only reason why I was hired above somebody else was that Sherri Donghia, who's one of the most important mentors in my career, recognized that I was wearing a Comme des Garçons outfit. Sherri also had a big fashion background. She's the one who really channeled my passion for fashion and helped me apply it to the home furnishing industry because that's what she was able to do. Boy, talk about a lady who has so much flare and amazing marketing instincts, and such a great sense of style, and she's just oozing with creative energy.

Stephanie Zollinger: You were at the right place at the right time.

Miry Park: I was at the right place at the right time. I was really able to start my career and develop my career at Donghia. When I left Donghia, I was Director of Marketing. I had the opportunity to be exposed to this industry and work with amazing people like the late John Hutton, who was an amazing furniture designer, and also have this amazing learning experience and relationship with Sherri Donghia.

Stephanie Zollinger: How long were you there?

Miry Park: I was there for close to 10 years.

Stephanie Zollinger: What made you want to leave?

Miry Park: I felt like it was the right time for me to make a move. I was at the right age. I needed to explore a little bit more.

Stephanie Zollinger: You were in need of a challenge?

Miry Park: Yes. I needed new challenges. I needed to be exposed on a different level. I felt that I had accomplished a lot there and I needed to go and advance myself in a different way which, eventually, led to Cowtan & Tout. That's when I met Jack Larsen because Larsen, of course, is one of the brands under the Cowtan & Tout umbrella.

Stephanie Zollinger: So what year was this about? Do you remember?

Miry Park: 2000. In 2000 I accepted a position as Vice President of Marketing at Cowtan & Tout. I worked pretty closely with Jack because, at the time, my office was in the Design Studio. At the time, Jack was also very actively involved with the Larsen Design Studio. I had an amazing opportunity to talk to him about all the designs because I was helping to create all the sales materials. I was presenting all the products to the press. I really had to inform myself as much as possible and Jack was the person who would sit down with me and give me his overview on every single design.

Stephanie Zollinger: So you were basically reintroducing his older lines that had been created?

Miry Park: No. I was introducing new lines, I wasn't reintroducing them. Basically, he would be working with the Design Studio. When it came time to launch the collections, I would talk to the Design Director, and also with Jack, about each of the designs so that I had enough information to help write the sales material, and also to inform the press when I presented the product to the press. While I was talking to Jack about these various designs he really taught me a lot about the history of 20th century design, things that I hadn't quite learned enough in school. I had a pretty good foundation, basic learning about contemporary architecture, which helped, but Jack gave me an intimate view into that. He told me stories about

working with some of the biggest names in 20th century architecture. He told me humorous stories about working with Niemeyer.

Stephanie Zollinger: Do you have any stories you can share?

Miry Park: Well, I think you should really ask Jack those questions because it's the way he tells it from his own personal experience that has much more meaning than from a third party. But, let me just suffice to say that, he told me these wonderful stories of working with these amazing architects that you study about and read about. I was so in awe that here was a person that was there at the moment to work alongside these people, to advance contemporary design, and to define what the modern movement meant in America. It was very, very exciting for me. Very exciting.

Stephanie Zollinger: And powerful.

Miry Park: Very powerful. When I realized that he was good friends with Hugh Hardy, and when eventually Dianne Benson came into the realm of LongHouse, it just made sense. There was a sense of relevance to everything that I had done up to this point that had all had a relationship in knowing Jack Larsen. <Laughs>

Stephanie Zollinger: He tied everything together?

Miry Park: In one way, yes, in terms of my career. In one way, yes, it felt a little more complete when I met Jack.

Stephanie Zollinger: Can you tell me, what are your most favorite memories of Jack or working with Jack?

Miry Park: Well, he has a wonderful fashion sense. He has such an original air about him. He's another one of these amazing individuals that exude creativity in everything that he does. Traveling with Jack, I would see him in these amazing coats, and these amazing scarves, and these amazing hats. Just to be in his orbit, basically, <laughs> gave me a real sense of accomplishment and a real sense of satisfaction at what I personally had been able to achieve and the fact that I had exposure to

someone who had this much flare, creativity, and originality. I would be in awe every day that he'd come in wearing this amazing fur coat with this incredibly tactile, beautiful hem, with that wool scarf wrapped around him and draping down, and these incredible hats that he would wear. He was also an amazing communicator. He is still an incredible communicator. I think the man writes about 50 notes a day or probably more. He would write off these quick notes to tell you what was on his mind and really, I think, we all learned to save those notes because they had such a panache of Jack's way of expressing himself. I think receiving one of those notes could either be incredibly intimidating or incredibly uplifting but I have a fond memory of receiving those handwritten notes or those dictated notes. I still get them every once in a while and I love that. Really, just sitting by his side and listening to him tell stories, those are some of my favorite memories. Seeing him come through the studio and also listening to his stories.

Stephanie Zollinger: Do you have a favorite Larsen textile?

Miry Park: Oh, my goodness, there are so many. That's a really tough question because there are so many incredibly beautiful textiles. I would say that one of my favorite Larsen textiles is called *Remoulade*. I wasn't around when it was designed, but I helped when I first began my career at Cowtan to organize a show that was being curated by the Museum of Arts and Design called *Jack Lenor Larsen: Creator and Collector*. That was one of the fabrics that was featured. I was also organizing a small exhibit that we were holding in our Chicago showroom and so I had the opportunity to go through a lot of the archives. That one fabric just blew my mind, the different types of yarns that had gone into that one fabric. It's basically a plain weave but the kind of yarns that went into it were just so beautiful, and the saturation of color, brightness, and the hodgepodge mix of all these different fibers. It was just a glorious fabric.

Stephanie Zollinger: Can you talk a little bit more about the Larsen line being moved to Paris. Can you just tell us when that happened?

Miry Park: That was a very recent development. As I said, it's under the stewardship of Ariane Dalle who also worked with the Larsen Design Studio in the '90s.

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you. So, in 2000, when you began to work with Larsen, he had already sold his Design Studio to Cowtan & Tout. Did Cowtan & Tout end up with all the Larsen fabrics that had been in the lines previously?

Miry Park: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: So how did the older lines get out to the general public?

Miry Park: I guess, what you're asking me is, how were the older Larsen Designs incorporated into the current collection?

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes.

Miry Park: For the most part, it actually wasn't. I think that what they felt at the time, what the Design Director at the time felt was marketable and sellable, stayed in the collection. Then they continued to add, with Jack's help. The reason why we had a lot of the older designs is that Krista Stack, who was the Design Director of Larsen, had the foresight to preserve the Larsen Archive.

Stephanie Zollinger: Do you still have a piece of the archive here or is it in Paris?

Miry Park: Yes, we do, in New York City, in storage.

Stephanie Zollinger: In storage.

Miry Park: Yes, wrapped with archival paper, and documented, and everything.

Stephanie Zollinger: Do your former or current designers use it for inspiration?

Miry Park: Now, that's a good question because that goes back to your other question about how the older designs were incorporated into the collection. Our designers are always inspired by the Larsen Archives. The Larsen point of view and the heritage is never disregarded when they're moving forward with new designs. In fact, we have actively reissued older designs on a pretty regular basis, reintroduced them. Now it's not possible to reintroduce all the designs, obviously, for many different reasons, such as not being able to source the same yarns, or something as basic as that, or being able to weave it in a way that would be affordable today.

Stephanie Zollinger: Or fit into today's fashion sense?

Miry Park: Exactly.

Stephanie Zollinger: But some of what he was producing in the '60s or '70s would certainly very much fit into what's happening today, I think.

Miry Park: Absolutely. I think that the power of the Larsen textile collection is that it has such a timelessness and longevity even though, at the time, it was something so new and groundbreaking. It still feels so fresh and exciting today as it did back then, in fact, sometimes more so now when you look back at some of the designs from the '60s. The color palettes are fearless and the graphic sense is just amazing.

Stephanie Zollinger: Have your textile designers with Cowtan & Tout utilized any of his techniques, do you know?

Miry Park: As I've said, our design directors and our Design Studio has always been influenced by the work of Jack Larsen. Regardless of what brand, if you're working in the textile industry today, you're influenced by Jack Larsen. There's just no way around that. He's made an indelible stamp on textiles for the home as it is today.

Stephanie Zollinger: In your opinion, Miry, what has been his greatest contribution to the world of textiles?

Miry Park: Well, for our industry, as an industry and as a whole, I think Jack was a pioneer in being able to merge art and commerce. He has

such a keen sense of marketing. He has always been able to see opportunity, and take that opportunity, and turn it into success.

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes, and he was one of the first to travel abroad and really globalize.

Miry Park: That's right. That was going to be my second point. Aside from the fact that he's really been able to merge art and commerce to help create a brand behind a textile company in a field that was really comprised of small trade shops. Here comes Jack Larsen and he creates this amazing brand. He takes textiles and marries it with amazing quality, and originality, and design, and brings it to a consumer. Now, it's this continuing belief that he has about life and art being merged, like living with art, but not in a rarified way. It's having art in your life so that it's something that's not extraordinary. It's just a part of living. I think he's been able to contribute to that through creating this product that's just really beautiful and worthy of being in the Louvre. He was one of four Americans to have an exhibit at the Louvre and open it up so that people could bring art into their own homes. He continues to do that with LongHouse. Through demonstration, he shows people how he lives with art on a day-to-day basis. The second point is that he really validated third world craft into the Western world of design and saw the value of it. He was also able to translate tradition into contemporary design in a very innovative way. So, I think, those are some of the legacies that he has created.

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you. I have just one last question. Is he still involved at all with his lines via Cowtan & Tout?

Miry Park: Well, Jack always is in touch. He's never out of touch. That's what keeps Jack Larsen vital and has always kept me vital. He's always in touch. He doesn't have much contact on a day-to-day basis in terms of what he does with the Design Studio. In fact, he's really very, very busy with LongHouse Reserve and he's dedicated a lot of his energy towards making LongHouse Reserve better and better. So, while he does visit our showroom from time-to-time and encourages the designers, he doesn't have any direct input on a regular basis.

Stephanie Zollinger: I see. Thank you so much.

Miry Park: You're welcome.