

Jack Lenor Larsen Oral History Project: Interview with Stephanie Rothschild

Stephanie Zollinger: It's Tuesday, May 19, 2009, and I'm here with Stephanie Rothschild. We're going to talk about the Larsen Studio and her influence in making this company so significant. So, Stephanie, if you could give us a little background information as to where you grew up, your connection with textiles, your training, and then how you ended up working with the Larsen Studio.

Stephanie Rothschild: I grew up in Boston. I went to NYU and I fell in love with New York. I was a Sociology major. When I graduated I went into graphic arts. Then I traveled with a British theater company. When I came back to the States, I went to the New York School of Interior Design because I had always been intrigued by color, design, and textile influences. I went to their placement office looking for an entry level job and they said, "There's a company, Jack Lenor Larsen, and there's an opening in the Design Studio. Do anything you can to get that job because it's a small company where everybody can have an enormous impact and you'll stay there forever."

Stephanie Zollinger: Backing up just a minute, what did you do with your British group?

Stephanie Rothschild: I did graphics and I was a tech person. I was on the road with them in the Midlands. It was a tough time.

Stephanie Zollinger: So you had a good color sense and a feel for design and knew the terminology?

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes. Then, when I went to the New York School of Interior Design, I took different courses in color, and construction, and things like that. But I started as an expeditor being responsible for trafficking the fabric.

Stephanie Zollinger: What does that mean when you traffic the fabric?

Stephanie Rothschild: I entered as the person who was responsible for taking a project from the start. I was the conduit between Jack, the designers, the Studio Manager, and the studio. I was also responsible for taking it to the Marketing Department, taking it to the Sample Department, taking it to Customer Service, and going to shows. I would go to showrooms and talk about it. Sometimes either Jack or I would go and talk about the whole collection by fabric and give the salespeople the tools to be able to communicate the inspiration, the construction, the colors, the story behind the collection. When I started, there was a studio manager who left after a couple of weeks so they were in transition.

Stephanie Zollinger: About what was the year, do you remember?

Stephanie Rothschild: Nineteen seventy-fiveish, I think. I was there from '75 to '91. I used to describe my job as dessert. It was so rich and satisfying and everybody was like that. It was Larsen.

Stephanie Zollinger: Icing on the cake.

Stephanie Rothschild: It was icing on the cake. Over time the company restructured and grew and I went personally from Expediter to Studio Manager. Then my job was changed to Studio Director and I became a Vice President of the company. All the way along I worked with Jack and the designers and the suppliers worldwide trying to facilitate both. If there was a concept that they wanted to explore, or a technology that they wanted to explore, I was responsible for working out how to bring it into the collection and then responsible for taking the individual fabric pieces and incorporating them into the company.

Stephanie Zollinger: So you were there during the time that he was expanding into the European market, Larsen carpets, and Larsen furniture?

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes and there was a time, in the Terra Nova Collection, when there was even dinnerware, towels, and bedding.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you oversee that as well?

Stephanie Rothschild: The studio itself would ebb and flow. In its biggest time, there were two to eight, maybe as many as ten designers, in addition to Jack.

Stephanie Zollinger: That's quite a few.

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes but, ordinarily, there was usually a senior print designer, Paul Gedeohn; a junior print designer who changed; a senior weave designer, Mark Pollack; and Lisa Scull. They were the primary ones plus an intern. Often the junior designers were interns.

Stephanie Zollinger: So they helped however help was needed?

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes, they would work on projects, or dyeing, or weaving, whatever was needed.

Stephanie Zollinger: If you had showrooms overseas, who would train the personnel or work with that group?

Stephanie Rothschild: Larsen Europe had a different sensibility. The European line was always pieces of the Larsen Collection but its emphasis was a little bit different. The colors, the pallet, was sometimes different or else selected from, but it wasn't entirely the same.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you oversee that or was that another group of people?

Stephanie Rothschild: There was always someone in Europe who managed that. There was a showroom in Stuttgart and a showroom in Zurich. We were very much connected to Larsen Europe. For instance, when the Louvre had their collection, Jack and I went over. The collection would be pulled together but Jack would come in with his eye and he would jump on a ladder and change it.

Stephanie Zollinger: Rearrange it?

Stephanie Rothschild: Rearrange it and bring in some color, something that would make the whole thing pop or come together.

Stephanie Zollinger: That is great. If you could, as simply as you could, describe the difference between the Larsen Design Studio and Jack Lenor Larsen, Inc.?

Stephanie Rothschild: Jack Lenor Larsen, Inc., was the corporation that sold Larsen fabric. They had a collection. They had a series of showrooms, plus they had representatives who had other showrooms but included the Larsen line. Larsen Design Studio was the designing arm of that corporation. Within that, there were, at different times, different entities. Larsen Carpet was first its own entity and then it was bought out but it still contained Larsen designs. Things ebbed and flowed. The company expanded in good times and contracted in other times. There were always things that were in Larsen, Inc., that were exclusively Larsen. Is that answering the question?

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes. Did people like Paul Gedeohn design carpet or was he strictly upholstery? Who worked with the carpet design?

Stephanie Rothschild: The weave designer usually but, the way that the Design Studio worked, everything was a collaborative effort. I'm going to skip ahead and talk about how a collection would come to be.

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes and if you could please tie in design process and concept development.

Stephanie Rothschild: We, the Larsen Design Studio, worked with producers all over the world ranging from handspun fabric in Swaziland, Africa, to ikat design in Thailand, to European jacquards, to batiks that were actually done on our own premises, traditional, weft batik. What would typically happen is Jack would have a design inspiration. He would call the designers and myself together and we would sit down and he would say, "This is my idea for the next collection." He would have pictures if it was inspired by this piece of pottery or something else. He would usually have a color sense of where the pallet was going to fall. Then, Paul Gedeohn would go off and actually create the whole pallet that would relate to this design. Then, on an ongoing basis, there were all the

suppliers from about 35 countries around the world. When price wasn't a factor the suppliers would constantly be coming in. They would show their capabilities. Larsen would be given an exclusivity for different techniques, some of which the mill would come to us with, some of which Larsen would go to the mill and ask about. Oftentimes, it would be that the mill would say, "This is something special that we can do." Then we would go back and say, "If you could do that, what would happen if we pushed the envelope a little bit further?" It would often be a unique construction or a unique approach. There would be a number of techniques from various producers that we wanted an opportunity to use. Then we would go back to the collection and say, "This would be the window. These could be the window fabric techniques. These could be the carpets. These would be the fabrics." Then there were always, back to your question, solids that were either new or things that were successful in the line that we would update with colors that related and reflected back to this new collection. Then the print designers would go off and develop. Paul would go off and do the prints and then Mark or Lisa, depending on the time, would go off and do the weave.

Stephanie Zollinger: So they would take Paul's drawings and interpret them in terms of weave structure?

Stephanie Rothschild: They were actually designing the weaves themselves. Sometimes Jack would have specific designs, often going back to the archives. You have the Larsen archive. Do you also have Jack's archives?

Stephanie Zollinger: In terms of his collections?

Stephanie Rothschild: His treasures, yes. We used to call them his treasures.

Stephanie Zollinger: I think we have a few things but we do not have examples of his baskets that he's collected and things like that. We may have photographs.

Stephanie Rothschild: He had a whole room of his treasures. He developed his own binary system to categorize the treasures which had to do with age, technique, and country. He developed a whole elaborate

system. Let's say, for example, he could have an African Kuba cloth that he wanted to somehow incorporate into an American. It was somehow different, he didn't copy it, but the inspiration would come from it.

Stephanie Zollinger: Right.

Stephanie Rothschild: When we did the American Indian Collection we actually used the artifacts from the Haystack Collection. Let's say the pottery, and those types of things, were then incorporated into textile design. Going back to the specific, the weave designers were doing not just the construction but the weave designs. Paul was doing not just the prints but also often the jacquard designs, putting them into repeat. He would develop them and put them in repeat, depending on the confines of the specifics.

Stephanie Zollinger: At the time, did you all realize that you were global before anyone else?

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: That was unique for this time period. People weren't going abroad and hunting out yarns from this country and then having them dyed in another country.

Stephanie Rothschild: Right, yes. We were very aware. For instance, in China, the minute that trade was lifted and we were free to trade, Larsen was one of the first to deal with China and, in fact, Mark Pollack went to China. He was working on jacquards. This is just a little story, but it's a funny story.

Stephanie Zollinger: Great, yes.

Stephanie Rothschild: The Chinese at that time were not very sophisticated. It was the beginning of them working with Western designers. He was in some very humble hotel and the Chinese would come every day to his room to meet and work on the design. He was very, very fastidious. He would have his shirt out on something, maybe they didn't have a bureau, I don't know, but he had his shirts out so he could

see them. They would come and snoop around and be looking at his shirts. They would go through his actual personal luggage and belongings because they didn't know. Jack and I took the Chinese out when they first came to America. They had never been before and he wanted to take them for a very special meal. We went to this steakhouse. I guess it was Sparks Steakhouse, I can't remember, but some old steakhouse in the Village that was very famous. Anyway, we went to this steakhouse with these Chinese people who weren't that sophisticated. They were served their meal and were desperately looking around the table and finally they said, "Where is the soy sauce?" It was funny.

Stephanie Zollinger: That was great.

Stephanie Rothschild: He was always very hands on with everything. There was a feeling. There was something that was an energy that was translated down from him, even the choices of the people who were hired. There was a certain chemistry and everybody inspired everyone else. There's actually a designer who had worked at Marimekko. He was a Japanese designer who worked for many years as a print designer and he did the more naïve kinds of designs. It was very much an ebb and flow, very blurred boundaries between everybody, so it was this inspired pool that came together.

Stephanie Zollinger: It seems like everyone was able to capitalize on their strengths, and you came together as a collaborative group, and you were all able to shine?

Stephanie Rothschild: Very much so.

Stephanie Zollinger: Which is very unique. In terms of your duties, if you were given a job description as Manager and then Vice President, was it basically to oversee the studio and the designers?

Stephanie Rothschild: No. I would meet with the suppliers, call in the designers, or call in Jack sometimes. Sometimes I would select the sample, take the information, apply ideas that they had, see what they could do, or I went to the mills in Europe.

Stephanie Zollinger: In search of new mills or just to further the design?

Stephanie Rothschild: Everything went to market. I went to Heimtex to the different design markets looking for new designs, designers, mills, to meet with existing mills, to facilitate projects. Sometimes I would go with Jack and sometimes I would go with the print designers to a print mill, sometimes with the weave designers, sometimes just me, sometimes just them. It depended. To the design show and to the exhibitions it was often Jack and me. We would actually be up until the last minute carrying bolts of fabrics that had just arrived off the plane to the exhibits.

Stephanie Zollinger: Then you helped coordinate the events in the showroom and would go to the openings?

Stephanie Rothschild: We'd go to the openings. Sometimes Jack would, sometimes I would. The idea was to give them the story about the collection so they would have something so that when they were selling they would be able to actually translate, "This was the inspiration, this is how it happened, this is the evolution."

Stephanie Zollinger: So you would set the whole staff down in the showroom and give a presentation with all the background information?

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: You had a lot of interaction with Jack on a day-to-day basis that a lot of people didn't, is that right?

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: What was your involvement with the other departments?

Stephanie Rothschild: I had a lot of involvement with Customer Service and with the Fabric Division. A collection is conceived and then the Design Studio was responsible. We had a certain budget that we were given, a new fabric budget every year, which the collection was based on.

Stephanie Zollinger: When you say a fabric budget, does that mean for development of a collection?

Stephanie Rothschild: It was for the combination of development and the first production. The studio was responsible for the conception through the order of the first production. I was actually ordering inventory the first time of each new fabric or carpet or whatever it was.

Stephanie Zollinger: On average was the goal to do a new collection every year?

Stephanie Rothschild: We did two collections, more or less, but sometimes it could be a major and a minor. We tried to do a major introduction a year. Then, as the company got bigger, there would be a collection and we would have a budget. Then we would decide how many colorways. We had to work within the framework of the budget, which fabrics, how many colorways, and all of that. The Design Studio would screen it. We would make our decisions and then we would show it to the Fabric Department and to Marketing and to Sales. In the early years it was much more autonomous. As time went on, it became more bureaucratic. Also, as the economy ebbed and flowed, it became more tied into sales. There was more input on the part of the Fabric Division or the Sales Department, "We need more colorways of this or less colorways," and we would try to incorporate that into the designs.

Stephanie Zollinger: When Jim Thompson disappeared how did the Thai Silk Division tie in? I know you bought his company after he disappeared. How did that work into your collections?

Stephanie Rothschild: Jim Thompson disappeared before I came, but Thai Silk was a very, very important piece of the Larsen Collection. We worked very closely with them. There was also, at the time that I was there, a young designer, Tinnart Nisalak, who came as an apprentice from Thailand. He came and worked in the Design Studio and, when he went back, he was still very involved as a senior designer at Jim Thompson. Also, Gerald Pierce was at Jim Thompson. The relationship was very close.

Stephanie Zollinger: So when Larsen sold his work was that to Thai Silk? Was it still tied into Larsen?

Stephanie Rothschild: Thai Silk wasn't bought, wasn't ever owned, by Larsen.

Stephanie Zollinger: For some reason I thought it was. Did he take over temporarily?

Stephanie Rothschild: Larsen always had a lot of Thai silk. The Jim Thompson Collection was distributed through Larsen so maybe Larsen at one time had the American rights to the Jim Thompson Collection, which was not the Larsen type silk. They came from the same mill but Jim Thompson had their own designs and their own label. They were carried in the Larsen showrooms or were carried in some of the showrooms that Larsen was carried in. Plus, Larsen had many fabrics that were designed at Thai Silk Company.

Stephanie Zollinger: I understand. Larsen did the Jim Thompson Collection as a tribute to Jim Thompson, and then he used the same mill as Jim Thompson and that became the Thai Silk line that was produced from that mill?

Stephanie Rothschild: The Jim Thompson Collection? Did he ever do a Jim Thompson Collection?

Stephanie Zollinger: He did *An Homage to Jim Thompson*. There were fabrics in there with strawberries, *Fraise*.

Stephanie Rothschild: Then it would have been a collection.

Stephanie Zollinger: So the Larsen line of Thai Silk had nothing to do with Jim Thompson?

Stephanie Rothschild: Right. They were exclusive Larsen Collection.

Stephanie Zollinger: That helps. I was under the understanding that, when Jim Thompson disappeared and they weren't able to find him, they needed someone to take over.

Stephanie Rothschild: That could very well be. That was before me. Jim Thompson and Jack had a very close relationship so I can't tell you exactly how that worked. Ultimately Jim Thompson, the Thai Silk Company, was a supplier of Larsen, for Larsen, of Larsen designs. Maybe Larsen represented some Jim Thompson fabrics, and then they became more separate entities.

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you. Can you give a story or talk to us about some of your most memorable experiences with Larsen? I know holiday parties were famous.

Stephanie Rothschild: Holiday parties were famous! They were the best. He also had spectacular parties at his house. Every holiday he would do a very elaborate party. The whole studio would be invited for a holiday lunch and everybody would get a holiday present. Everyone would give him a present but his presents were always wrapped. He had extra people come and they were wrapped in Japanese fabrics.

Stephanie Zollinger: You didn't even want to open them!

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes, they were pretty. It was pretty special. He always had Halloween parties, costume parties and that kind of thing. He once had a costume party that I could tell you about. I could talk forever, but he once had a costume party and he invited his friends who were all very famous personages, gallery owners, artists, and the like. One year he decided, wouldn't it be fun to have a costume party where everyone was wearing masks so nobody knew who anybody else was? He had the party and everybody was wearing masks. It was amazing. It was one of the most extraordinary evenings I've ever had where no one knew who was behind the mask but everybody was just so open. It was very unique. People were without any pretense, they were very open. All of a sudden, at midnight, Jack said, "And now we will take off our masks." As soon as the masks came off people became very distant, very much more formal. It was an interesting experience. When I would travel with Jack he had very interesting friends. He is a very portly gentleman, he's delightful, very chivalrous, fascinating. Once we were in Paris and we were invited to

Andrée Putman's apartment. I was just so awestruck. She made me feel like a young awestruck kid. She was most fascinating. There was something about being in Jack's world that was so thrilling.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you ever believe, when you went to the New York School for Interior Design, that you'd walk away and enter this world?

Stephanie Rothschild: No, it was like I hit the jackpot.

Stephanie Zollinger: A couple of other questions dealing with technique, Win Anderson is the one that bought the machine that did the batiks in house?

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: Can you talk about this machine that she bought and how you went about this process?

Stephanie Rothschild: Win was before me. She was at the beginning and started the company with Jack. She bought this batik equipment and she trained Phillip Warner, who was one of our print designers, to use it. It actually was a wax process with rollers. I came when they were still doing the production.

Stephanie Zollinger: She was gone already by '75?

Stephanie Rothschild: She was gone already. She got very bad arthritis in all her joints and she moved out west.

Stephanie Zollinger: But she is the one that did that process?

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: I hear it was a very secretive process?

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes, she and Phillip Warner knew it but it was very secretive and it took up an enormous amount of space. It was very big.

Stephanie Zollinger: And very laborious in that it was all done by hand not machine generated?

Stephanie Rothschild: Right. When I came it was in transition. It was the time that they took the batiks and ultimately ended up translating them to print design.

Stephanie Zollinger: I know there were designs that were produced by wood blocks. Was that done in house or was that done overseas?

Stephanie Rothschild: No, that was done overseas. Jack traveled extensively and he was always discovering new things. When he would travel or discover something he would either find a technique or find a person who could do something. Or people would come to Larsen with woven leather rugs or different, exotic capabilities, and Larsen was the place that could find a way of channeling that capability into something that could be commercially viable.

Stephanie Zollinger: When he set out on these adventures to Afghanistan, or to China, did he do his homework before he went and knew where to go or did he say, "I'm just going to go. I'm going to explore and whatever happens, happens." Do you know?

Stephanie Rothschild: I guess maybe both. He was really, is really, a Renaissance man. He was extraordinarily knowledgeable about a lot of things. Also, he could find inspiration in things that were very simple. It could be he would have a way of seeing a color combination, or seeing something, some tiny pattern that, if you enlarged it, could become something else.

Stephanie Zollinger: So that we can get a better understanding, you were basically involved with the Larsen Studio?

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: Then there was another person that would oversee advertising, marketing, and then somebody else that would oversee production?

Stephanie Rothschild: Ongoing production, yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: Can you give us an idea of how many departments there were within Larsen or the structure?

Stephanie Rothschild: There was the Accounting Department, Customer Service, the Fabric Division, the Carpet Division, the Marketing Department, the Personnel Department, and the Design Studio. The Marketing Department, by the time I left, was very powerful. The Marketing Department was always in flux. It went from sometimes not having a director but being a facilitator for Jack. Jack was for many years really the marketing director and sometimes he would bring in consultants to work on special projects.

Stephanie Zollinger: Even the marketing that you sent out were works of art and very creative in the delivery of the message, and the delivery of the fabric swatches.

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes. The Marketing Department really took the longest to evolve. It began as Fabric and Sampling. Marketing, of course, was extremely critical. It was either Jack working with marketing firms or consultants for many years with people facilitating until around the very late '80s, early '90s. Then it became its own department. The New York sales, the New York showroom, was the most important, the most prominent, because it was so close. We could really easily call upon them. Jack also would, from time to time, call one of his other salespeople in for input about different ideas. People were always coming in. The Design Studio was never closed. In a lot of places it's closed and nobody's allowed in. It really didn't have that flavor at all.

Stephanie Zollinger: Because, as you said, overall Larsen was a small company.

Stephanie Rothschild: For a very long time.

Stephanie Zollinger: So, on your best estimate, would there be 30 people in the whole company, including all departments, or was it more than that?

Stephanie Rothschild: No, it was more than that. Are we counting the showroom as well?

Stephanie Zollinger: Yes.

Stephanie Rothschild: If there was a party, or if there was a meeting, certainly there would be five or six people that were in the showroom, plus five or six people maybe in accounting, plus five or six people maybe in Customer Service. Customer Service had a manager but it was part of the Fabric Division and the Sampling Department. There was a man there for many, many years, Manning Field.

Stephanie Zollinger: I've heard of Manning, yes.

Stephanie Rothschild: Manning was a Vice President in charge of overseeing the Fabric Division. He was a real character. He had a monocle and he wore sandals even in winter. He was a real character. He once described the people who worked at Larsen as "a herd of rogue elephants." It was a very apt way of describing the company. It really was just a very particular group of characters.

Stephanie Zollinger: That had a passion?

Stephanie Rothschild: That had a passion, yes.

Stephanie Zollinger: Well, I want to thank you for doing this. One last question, if you could walk away with one memory of Larsen what would it be?

Stephanie Rothschild: Being at Jack's house in the Hamptons, ultimately LongHouse but Round House before that. It was a Larsen party. I don't remember what the occasion was but I remember everybody was together. It was extraordinary, whatever it was, and the food was so

wonderful. I remember it just started to get chilly. You suddenly felt Jack drape over your shoulders a shawl of Swazi cloth, this handspun mohair from Swaziland. I don't know, it was just Jack.

Stephanie Zollinger: If you could just address, in our closing, some bullet points or key ideas? We all know that Jack Lenor Larsen, Inc., was important to the history of textile design and played a significant role in some of its innovation, but why is Jack Lenor Larsen, Inc., so different from any other company? What sets it apart and why will it go down in history as being so significant?

Stephanie Rothschild: Because it never was satisfied with design the way it was. It was always, both artistically and technique-wise, pushing the envelope to see if this could be done, then why couldn't that be done, and anything was possible. Everyone who was there saw it in that same kind of way. It was really giving permission to always think the sky is the limit and be able to push. It was satisfying in that way. It was inspiring in that way and it was just a group of the most creative, wonderful people.

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you very much. Can you give us one last story?

Stephanie Rothschild: Yes. I remember we were working on a tapestry and the sample blanket had come back. It was hanging on the wall and it was gorgeous. Jack looked at it. He pondered it, and pondered it, and walked around it from one direction to another. Then he said, "Wait a sec. I'll be right back." He ran to the back of the studio. He got the coffee pot. He took the sample off the wall, crumbled it up, stuck it in the coffee pot, pulled it back out and said, "Now it's perfect." It was because he saw that it just needed a little bit of muting to tone it down. Then we re-specified it based on this.

Stephanie Zollinger: Coffee color?

Stephanie Rothschild: It wasn't that it was a coffee color, it was that it made the contrast a little bit less.

Stephanie Zollinger: It toned it down?

Stephanie Rothschild: It toned it down.

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you.

End of Stephanie Rothschild.mpTE-001 & 2